

# Absolute Magnitude

## Science Fiction Adventures

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Longyear

Kill all the Lowyers

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Star Wars Author

Algis Budrys

The Melancholy of Infinite Space

by

Geoffrey  
A. Landis

Don D'Ammassa

Jamie Wild

Darrell Schweitzer

Fall 1996



# Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$

We are in the midst of what, I am certain, will be remembered as the second Golden Age. It is an exciting, and important, time to be publishing a science fiction magazine. There are more science fiction magazines being distributed nationally today than at any other time since the Golden Age. The desktop publishing revolution coupled with the book distributors' new willingness to distribute magazines has infused new blood and life into science fiction.

Until desktop publishing came along layout and design costs were such that they kept most would-be publishers out of the professional arena. Those few who had the resources for professional layout then had to produce hundreds of thousands of copies of their magazines in order for the independent magazine distributors to be willing to distribute them. Once the distributors took the magazines they often failed to get them into stores, kept bad records, or deliberately misrepresented sales figures causing most new magazines to go out of business after only a few issues.

Things are very different today. Professional layout can be had for the price of a computer and the investment of time. Distribution can be obtained from book distributors rather than magazine distributors. This change in distribution is a great boon. It allows a magazine to get national distribution without going out of business, as the book distributors are willing to deal with numbers in the thousands rather than hundreds of thousands.

Today a magazine has time to build up a base before attacking the magazine stands of America. This was not so in the past. As a result, magazines such as *Absolute Magnitude*, *Pirate Writings*, *Worlds of Fantasy and Horror*, *Tomorrow*, *Aboriginal*, *Century*, and *Crank!* are all able to survive. Not even during the Golden Age was there this large a number of magazines being published by independent publishers. This is where the soul of science fiction resides, not with the mega corporations that carry on the bulk of all publishing in every field. The independents publish for the love of science fiction—money is not the only motivator here.

Where money is the only motivator you see decay and failure. Those who do not understand science fiction cannot hope to thrive publishing it! Many of the doomayers will point to the demise of *Amazing* and the changes at *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and even *F&SF*. But these people are wrong. *Amazing's* demise can be attributed to mismanagement. The changes at *Analog* and *Asimov's* are due to corporate restructuring (the stupidity of which could take up another entire editorial) and has nothing to do with the science fiction field.

Science fiction has not been this healthy in more than fifty years and we're excited to be standing on the threshold of this new Golden Age. So join us, turn the pages of *Absolute Magnitude* and remember that while looking to the future, we're making history!

## Absolute Magnitude Science Fiction Adventures

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Fall 1996

Issue #5

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*All artwork by Jim Hoston, except rocket ships by Tim Ballou,  
and illustration for "Sanitary Zone" by Jose B. Ortiz.*



Brian Plante's short fiction has appeared in *Pirate Writings*, *Space & Time*, and *Into the Darkness*. This is his first appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

# High Five

by Brian Plante

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Getting my right arm sucked down the meat grinder at work might have been the best thing that ever happened to me, but it required some getting used to at first. There wasn't gonna be no more high fives on the basketball court for me until I taught myself to jam it lefty, and even then it would be the five on the wrong hand side. And it was pretty obvious I'd have to give up my dream of becoming the next Jimi Hendrix. Shit, I even had to learn how to jerk off with the wrong hand.

After the stump had healed up a bit, they offered to give me a mechanical "Utah" arm, with some lame plastic hand on it. An "Otto Bock" hand they called it, like it was some cool piece of shit. This moron, Dr. Kincaid, said it would pick up nerve impulses from my stump, so I could move it "just like a natural arm." He even said, get this, that once I looked up the elbow, I'd be able to open and close the hand to pick up things. Big fucking deal.

They showed me an old fashioned video tape, like out of a museum or something, of some white guy using The Prosthetic. In fact, they shouldn't have called this thing a prosthetic—they should have called it a *pathetic*. The arm only bent at the elbow, and not at all at the wrist. All the fingers moved together at the same time to close on the thumb. It wasn't much different from the old mechanical hook with some phony fingers added to make it look good. I definitely wouldn't be palming no basketballs with that crummy hand. It was way past weak.

"Clean, I know it's not perfect," said Dr. Kincaid, "but the myoelectric hand has been proven in hundreds of thousands of cases over the last 40 years. It's the best you can expect under the circumstances."

The circumstances was workmen's compensation. If this arm was being used before I was born, way back in the 90's if you could believe it, then I figured there *must* be something better now. Something better for the rich folks, that is. Mindful of the way the world works, and who gets what, I was just about ready to accept that piece-of-shit arm.

"Does it come in brown?" I asked.

Kincaid gave a thoughtless laugh like I'd told a joke or something. "Of course," he said, smiling. "We can fit the Bock hand with a cosmetic glove of any color."

"Yeah, but what about the arm, Doc?"

Well, that smile ran right off his face so fast you would have thought it had legs. Man, I knew this was coming.

"Um, the arm only comes in fleshstone . . . ah, but with long sleeves and the cosmetic glove, I promise anyone would have a hard time picking out the Bock hand."

Fleshstone, he called it. I'm pretty light-skinned, but shit, that hand was *white*.

"Dr. Kincaid," I said, my voice rising, "I play basketball, and not in long-sleeved shirts. I ain't wearing no brown hand with no white

arm. Sorry, no thanks. I'll take a brown model or I'll sue your bony ass."

I could see Kincaid was shaken up pretty bad. He obviously wasn't used to dealing with no attitude.

"I'm sorry, but worker's comp won't cover that kind of work, Mr. Trent. If you want a custom color match on the arm, it'll have to be built special, and it'll cost a lot."

"Like I give a shit how much you gotta pay? *Get me that arm!*"

"Um, I don't think you understand, Mr. Trent. I mean it will cost you a lot. Unless you have substantial means, or can work out something with the board, I suggest you make do with what we're offering."

I cursed the doctor out something fierce that day, and I'm sorry now for causing such a ruckus, because after a while I realized it wasn't his fault at all. It's just the way things are, you know?

Well, I guess what they say about the squeaky wheel getting the grease is true, because after a few more days in the hospital, a new bunch of doctors I had never seen before came in and talked to me about something new—the "Kramer" hand.

"State-of-the-art direct neural control and tactile feedback through a high gain transceiver, Mr. Trent!"

"Each finger can pronate and supinate independently, Mr. Trent!"

"Simultaneous articulation at three joints on each finger and two in the thumb, Mr. Trent!"

"It's free if you sign a release and agree to help us test it, Mr. Trent."

I asked them if it came in brown. They said it had to be built special for me and that they'd make it purple if that's what I wanted. It seemed like I might be able to wear that arm without looking like a total freak, and maybe even play some ball with it. I worried briefly that if the hand worked too good, it might screw up my disability benefits, but I knew I could always lie and tell them that it wasn't working right if I had to. And what the hell, it came in brown. I signed the papers in my best left-handed scrawl and agreed to become their guinea pig.

I didn't realize when I agreed to try the Kramer hand that they had to operate on my *head*, but that's just what they were fixing to do. And I was supposed to be wide awake while they did it too. They said I had to be conscious so I could help them map my brain.

I told them loudly with some choice words they probably had never heard before what I thought they could map, and it sent them all scurrying away with frowns on their silly-assed faces for a while. Dr. Kincaid came in a little later and explained about how a transmitter right inside my brain would control the arm much better than any electrodes on my stump ever could. I had apparently signed the permission for them to do this to me already, and the only other choice would be that ugly white Utah arm. Besides, he said, it

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wouldn't hurt a bit with the local anesthetic they would give me. Easy for him to say.

I didn't see a thing, what with all the bright lights shining in my eyes, but damn, it was the scariest thing—they taking off the top of my skull, sawing and hammering away, and me not feeling a thing but hearing every sickening crunch and pop.

When my skull was opened, they asked me to move my right hand. Yeah, the same right hand that I didn't have anymore. They asked me to move each finger in turn, up then down, make a fist, then open, turn my palm up, then down. That sort of stuff went on for hours, it seemed. While all this was happening, I kept myself amused by wondering if those "special" hamburgers I was working on when the accident happened were wiggling in response down in somebody's gut. Hope they tasted real good.

Things got interesting when somebody asked me, "Do you feel anything?" Well, I don't know what they were doing back there, but I *did* feel something, like my hand was being slammed in a car door. My right hand. They kept adjusting things and asking me what I was feeling, and after a while they could fool me into thinking that any part of my hand was being pricked or squeezed or heated or cooled. It was just like somebody was fiddling with my hand, but I knew they were really screwing with my brain.

So then it was time to close my head up, and they explained that they were leaving a tiny radio transceiver inside, connected to the parts of my brain that were used to control my missing hand. Anyway, they did a neat job, with the scar hidden under where my hair would cover it when it grew back. I could feel the loop of antenna wire running under my scalp, but you couldn't see anything to look.

For the next few days, some computer geeks kept coming back to my hospital room with a big rack of fancy electronic gear on a wheeled cart. The geeks repeated the operating room drill, having me open and shut my right hand and move each of the fingers in turn. I still had only a stump there, mind you, but I could feel a phantom hand there, and send the signals that moved the muscles that no longer existed. The geeks always seemed satisfied and went away after a while.

A week later, the geeks brought out the Kramer hand for testing. It didn't look exactly like my real hand, but it was close enough that you'd be hard pressed to tell which one was real unless you'd touched them. They put the hand on top of the electronic rig with wires sticking out of the wrist. Just like always, we ran through the finger exercises once again, but this time, the hand moved in response to my signals. It was pretty weird, seeing that hand wiggling from across the room when my mind said move. If they had just put the thing alongside my stump, I would have felt a whole lot more comfortable with it, rather than watching it move around all disconnected like that.

The real surprise came when they tried the "biofeedback" test. One of the geeks poked the center of the hand's palm with a pen.

"Feel anything, Mr. Trent?"

I *did* feel something, the pen prodding my hand, but I felt it six inches from the end of my stump, where the hand would have been if it was attached. Major league strange. The geek poked all over the hand, did hot and cold tests, asked me to identify different textured materials without looking. It all worked. The hand was very sensitive, better than my real one, I figured. I probably would be able to palm a basketball with the thing, once they attached it.

Dr. Kincaid was the guy who ran my physical therapy. It turned out that he was responsible for pulling some strings that got me picked as a test subject for the Kramer hand in the first place, so I owed him an apology for all the commotion I caused earlier. He seemed a bit too straight-faced for me, but I guess he was okay in his own sort of way.

I told the doctor that I wanted to play basketball again, so one of the exercises he had me do to get used to the hand was to dribble a ball. Let me tell you, this hand was *great*. I could feel the lines on the ball with each fingertip, could feel the damned writing on the ball as I bounced it with ease around the PT gym. After a couple of days of this, I was ready for a game.

"Hey, Dr. K, how about a little one-on-one?"

"Me?" he says, shrugging his shoulders like I'm talking to some other Dr. K.

"Yeah you. Whatsamatter, don'tcha think you can keep up with a poor handicapped person like yours truly?"

Dr. K smiled his shitty grin, but a challenge: was a challenge, and I'm glad he had enough balls to take me up on it. Outside the gym was a couple of asphalt courts with crummy baskets, really hurting, but still playable. I let him take it out first.

I won't tell you how badly I beat the Doc, but I'll just say he gave it a pretty good try for a white guy. Man, that hand was so fast, I could dribble and palm and steal like you wouldn't believe. Stuff that made the best tricks you ever saw the Globetrotters do look lame. The only scary moment came early on, when I stuffed one in his face. The crack of my plastic wrist jamming the hard metal rim nearly made Dr. K's eyes bug out.

"Whoa, Cleon. No dunking, okay? That arm costs a fortune, and if you break it, there aren't a whole lot of spare parts."

"Whatever you say, Dr. K."

On the next play, I dribbled right through the Doc and came skying in hard, like I was gonna make a monster jam. Dr. K looked like he was about to cough up his pounding heart when, at the last second, I turned my wrist and gave the ball the sweetest little roll with two fingers to arc it in gently for the two points.

The hand was magic.

Over the next few months there were endless batteries of tests. The company that made the hand had me in the lab five hours a day, testing my strength, dexterity, "muscle memory" and all kinds of things I didn't even know a hand could do. I couldn't even tell them to buzz off—it was all spelled out in the contract I had signed.

The arm had some unexpectedly cool features too. Since it didn't need to be attached to my arm to work, I could set the thing down on the floor and let my fingers do the walking, just like it was some little animal or something, only it was my hand. When I picked up something that was too hot, I felt the pain, just as if it were a real hand, but I had the option to turn its sensitivity up or down for times like that, just by thinking about it. If the thing only had eyes, I probably could have made it walk to the kitchen and bring me back a beer without getting up.

Dr. K encouraged me to take up the guitar again, and I'm glad he did. I hadn't thought much about the guitar since the accident, but on Dr. K's urgings I dusted off the old Stratocaster. I used to play with a nylon pick, but now I found I could easily finger-pick the strings with all five fingers of my right hand, like a classical guitarist or a banjo player. I never had the discipline and finger independence to do this before with my natural hand. If only my old left hand could have kept

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up with the Kramer, I knew I could have really been something special on the guitar.

Physical Therapy wound down quickly. I had taken to the hand so naturally that there was little left to learn.

"So what are you going to do, go back to the meat packing plant?" asked Dr. K.

"Hell, no!" I answered. "If I was younger, I might try out for the NBA, but I was thinking about taking a shot at a career in music. You know, the guitar thing."

Dr. K flashed that shitty grin. I hated when he did that.

"You're very good with the guitar, Cleon. Unfortunately, there's a thousand other guys out there all trying to become rock stars too. Even if you're talented, the music business is a crap shoot with long odds. Maybe you should set your sights on something a bit more practical."

"Yeah, but I've been thinking," I explained. "What if I had a Kramer hand on my left arm too? My left hand is holding me back."

Dr. K was appalled. "You can't be serious! The Kramer is only a substitute for the real thing."

"No, it's more," I insisted. "It's better. With two Kramers, I could maybe be the best guitar player ever. Or how about a surgeon? Think what I could do with two hands like this."

"A surgeon is more than just a good pair of hands," he said in a condescending tone. "Besides, there's only a . . . well, a handful of these things in existence, anyway. Even if you lost your left hand, you'll never get another Kramer, so don't even think about it."

"Well, I'm not going back to making hamburgers!" I said, my voice rising in anger. "I swear, I'll cut the other hand off before I go back there again!"

"I'll see what I can do," Dr. K said.

And that's how I became an astronaut. Sort of.

Dr. K dug up some info on what kind of stuff was being done with the Kramer hands. Lots of things I never thought about—real tiny versions used by microbiologists to manipulate individual cells, extra large versions designed to pick up radioactive fuel rods and perform repairs under lethal conditions, grasping arms on deep-sea recovery vehicles—and all I was doing with it was playing basketball and guitar.

One really cool thing Dr. K uncovered was space exploration. Astronauts in orbit could send down little probes with Kramer arms to a planet's surface to do all the exploring by remote control. The Kramer probes were light and didn't have to be brought back up when the astronauts were done, so it saved a lot of fuel, and that seemed to be real important to the space people. I thought being an astronaut sounded pretty neat, and I told Dr. K that I wouldn't mind checking that out. He rolled his eyes like he thought I was crazy, but I gave him that look like I was gonna start yelling and he caved right in. The Doc made some calls, and I know this sounds like I'm making it up, but the space agency asked me to come on down. They were gonna give me a tryout. The Doc even booked me on a plane and gave me a lift to tie airport.

"You ain't just doing all this to get rid of me, are you Doc?" I asked on the ride to the airport.

Doctor K laughed. "Not at all, Cleon. Unlikely as it seems, you really have a shot at this. Apparently the space agency is having some difficulty training operators on the Kramer arm. I told them how well your arm was working out and they asked to see you."

"Yeah, but don't I have to know about space and stuff to get a job like that?"

"I don't know what they're looking for," the Doc said, shrugging his shoulders. "But they want to see you, so they must be interested. It's all up to you, Cleon."

"I got a shot at this, huh?"

"Yeah, Cleon, you do. Just one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"Your temper. Things aren't always going to go your way, but you have to keep your cool, okay? Don't blow this chance."

I gave the Doc my "who me?" look.

"Seriously, Cleon. Promise me, no yelling and cursing at these people or you're going to find yourself back in the meat packing plant again. Promise?"

Yeah, he had a point. My attitude had gotten me over with Dr. K, but he was different. This was my big shot and the folks at the space agency might not give a rat's ass about a guy like me.

"I'll try my best, Doc," I promised.

The Jupiter project was run out of a huge building near the Space Center in Houston. I was led through a maze of twisting corridors before finally winding up in "Test Suite 4." In there, I found a middle-aged woman in military fatigues seated at a table littered with Kramer arms and test equipment, sort of like the stuff they used at the hospital, only more complicated-looking. On the ceiling was a silvered dome, like you sometimes see in casinos and department stores to hide the security cameras.

"So nice to see you, Mr. Trent," the woman said, offering me her hand. "I'm Major Hosslet."

Well, she didn't smile and I got the feeling she wasn't at all happy to see me. I shook her hand firmly, and could see just a trace of revulsion creep over her face when she realized she was gripping cool plastic instead of warm flesh. It was hardly a cordial greeting.

"Did you have any trouble finding the place?" she asked.

Well, I'd just gotten lost three times on the way over from the airport, but this was a job interview. Of course I lied.

"No. Not at all. The directions were just fine."

"Good. For most of these tests you'll have to remove your arm, if you don't mind."

Damn straight, I minded. That arm was a part of me now, and I even dreaded the nightly ritual of removing it for recharging. It made me feel like some kind of cripple when I didn't have the arm on.

But I wanted this job and I kept my big mouth shut. I slipped the arm off and put it on the table in front of me. Maybe if I showed off a little it might help break the ice, I thought, and I made the arm finger-walk across the table in her direction and give a little wave.

"Yes, very clever," she said, never cracking a smile. I felt like launching the Kramer at her throat, but I remembered my promise to Dr. K about staying cool.

"You know, Mr. Trent, most of our trainees are pilots and scientists," she said, picking up my arm. Her hands felt cold on my Kramer's sensors.

"No, I didn't realize," I said. "I thought they were just regular people like me, with Kramer arms."

"The point is," she said in a haughty tone, "your records don't really show that you have much to bring to this project. Other than the arm, that is."

Swell. Not the kind of words you want to hear at a job interview, I thought. Maybe she was trying to intimidate me on purpose to see

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how I'd react to stress. I looked up at the silver camera dome in the ceiling and smiled.

"That may be true, Major," I said, my voice brimming with fake confidence, "but I hope you'll see how very good I am with the arm."

"That is what we're here to find out," she droned. "I have here a keypad. Lettered A through E, one key for each finger." She placed my Kramer hand on the pad and I centered my fingers over the five keys.

"In front of you is a monitor. Please watch the monitor, not your hand. Letters will appear on the monitor. When they do, press the corresponding key."

"That's it?" I asked.

"For now. Are you ready?"

"Sure enough. Let's do it."

No sooner had I answered when the letter A appeared on the screen. A—thumb. I pressed the key and heard a pleasing synthesized tone. Then a D came up and I pressed my ring finger, producing a tone several notes higher in pitch. It was all very simple, really. I just imagined that I was playing the guitar and the keys were strings. I'm no slouch at sight-reading music, and this was nearly the same thing. The pace steadily quickened, but I had no trouble keeping up, until I was tapping out a dazzlingly fast random melody that surprised even me. I was really getting into it, like I was locked into my own zone at a hot jam session when, just like that, it ended suddenly.

"So how'd I do?" I said, grinning.

The Major was clearly surprised with my speed and accuracy.

"Um . . . very . . . good," she said, looking at the numbers on her computer screen. "Perhaps we should try that again with one of the standard issue arms."

She opened my arm up at the base, hit a switch, and it went dead. This made me feel like a real piece of shit, having someone across the room being able to just switch off a part of me like that, without even asking. But I remembered Dr. K's warnings and let it pass.

The Major selected one of the other Kramer arms from the table and adjusted its jumper switches to match my own. As soon as she turned it on, I knew it didn't feel quite right—too slow and less sensitive or something. It was a white arm. She placed it on the keypad and we repeated the test.

After a few seconds, I realized the middle finger was real sluggish to respond to my commands. The servos were practically shot. Whenever a C came up on the screen it became harder and harder to press the key before the next letter came up. Damn, that woman knew she was giving me a bum arm, I thought. Still, it could have been another deliberate test, so I kept my cool.

The Major stopped the test long before I reached the speed I had done with my own Kramer, as I was messing up real bad with the middle finger. For the first time during our meeting, the bitch finally cracked a faint smile as she removed the white hand from the pad.

I explained about the faulty middle finger but she said none of the other operators had reported any trouble with that arm. When she switched my own arm back on, I made a fist and held it up in her direction.

"There, that's better," I said, raising my middle digit in the one-fingered salute. She kept her eyes on the computer monitor and her smirk didn't disappear, so I guess she didn't realize I was flipping her the bird.

I was passed on to several other testers in several other rooms, but the tests were all fairly easy, as long as they let me use my own arm.

After I handled all that they could dish out, Major Hosslet returned and told me I was accepted into the program. She didn't look like she was too happy about it.

I met all the other trainees, a couple of dozen all together, and noticed a few things right off. They were all male, white, and had two flesh-and-blood arms. I shouldn't have been surprised, but somehow I had it in my head that they were gonna be other amputees like me with Kramer arms. Instead they were all physicians, pilots, doctors and geologists—you know, your typical astronaut type. They each introduced themselves with some sort of a title as they greeted me:

"Wilson—Navy."

"Connelly—Astrophysics."

"Krauser—Computer specialist."

What could I say? "Trent—Schoolyard basketball?" Pretty pathetic, huh? I just left it at "Hi, I'm Cleon."

Everyone seemed friendly enough, but there was an undercurrent of tension in the room. These guys were all competing with each other for a limited number of slots on the Jupiter mission and most of them would wash out over the next few months. I didn't know how much they knew about me, so perhaps I was: imagining the snickers and sneers behind my back, and the way they would all clam up when I approached. Maybe they *did* know all about my unspectacular past and were taking me lightly. If they did, it was gonna be their problem.

At the training exercises the next day, it was easy to see where they were screwing up. They were being held back by the fact that they had two flesh-and-blood hands. While they manipulated the Kramers from across the room, their natural hands were twisting and spasming, trying to mirror the moves of the artificial hands. This slowed them down and limited their freedom of movement to only what they could imagine with their real hands.

The Kramer was capable of so much more and I, with my stump, easily controlled the hand faster and more freely than any of those hotshot scientists. This was gonna be a cinch. Over the months, their numbers dwindled until there was only a handful of us left. Since I didn't have any other real skills, they named me an EVA expert for the mission. Extra Vehicular Activity. That meant it would be my robot that would go down to the surface when we reached Jupiter, which suited me just fine.

The long trip to Jupiter was insanely boring, like riding a Greyhound for a solid month with nothing much to do. It wasn't until the ship was actually orbiting the big planet that it was my turn to shine. I was disappointed when my probe was assigned to Ganymede, one of the moons, figuring all the real action would be down on the planet itself, but it turned out to be a lucky draw because a gas planet like Jupiter doesn't really have a surface that a rover can walk on. After a few dozen orbits, my probe was set down on Ganymede and I was off.

My little rover roamed the surface, sending back eerie pictures of the icy, crazed landscape, all framed by my rover's Kramer hand. I made sure they put a *brown* hand on my rover for the camera to see. If I made any discoveries, I wanted to make sure everyone knew it was me up there.

Of course everyone knows that the Gany's didn't really come from Ganymede, but you can imagine how I felt on first seeing them. Sure, they were just picking up some fuel ice, on their way in toward the

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Sun, so if I hadn't spotted their base on the horizon, we would have met them in due time anyway.

But I—my rover that is, was the first to see a Gary. They're real strange looking dudes, so weird, yet I was never afraid. After all, even if they were hostile and destroyed my rover, I was still safe back in orbit, right? I knew it was a historic moment, one that would be played and replayed in a billion households. There was only one chance to make a first impression, and it was mine.

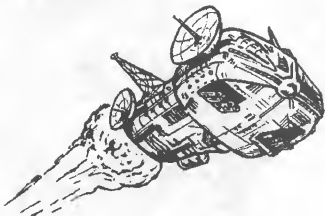
I approached one of the smaller Garys cautiously, moving the rover slowly but steadily. A few of the larger creatures moved behind the smaller one, which did not back off, but somehow gave me the impression that it was afraid. I reached forward with the Kramer, offering greetings. I must have moved too fast because they flinched and jumped back a step.

Slowly, I raised the hand, showing it to be empty, and spread the five mechanical fingers, waiting for a response. The smaller Gary that I had approached moved forward cautiously and raised one of the appendages they use for arms. He spread his three digits in three different directions, the now famous hand-of-all-thumbs. I moved the rover forward as slowly as its servos would take it, stopping when our hands were ten centimeters apart.

I zoomed the camera focus tight on my hand, just as the Gary grasped it, producing the familiar high-five-plus-three video sequence that you all know. You've all seen it, but I was there, sort of, and I *felt* it. It was my proudest moment.

There, that's my story. I know a lot of you think I'm some kind of a hero or something, but now you see it could have happened to

anybody. I do want to thank Dr. Kincaid for all the help he's given me over the years. And one more thing—if you like music, I've got this really great guitar album coming out next month you might want to give a listen to.

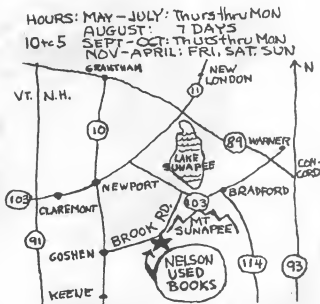


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Algis Budrys is the author of *Falling Torch*, *Rogue Moon*, and *Hard Landing*. He is also the editor of *Tomorrow*. This is his first appearance in the pages of *Absolute Magnitude*.

## The Deckplate Blues

by Algis Budrys

Dustin hung in his little transparent bubble of a turret at the fin tip of the mother ship, a man in sky, alone. The crib-mounted Kelsey was company of a sort, demanding courtesy and attention, but the nearest other man was some two hundred meters back up the fin.

The fin man was jacketed in his cocoon, with the broad-shouldered breech of his Kelsey crowding against his vision. But Dustin was farthest out on the fin so he was the most alone.

With his legs thrust into the stirrups that extended down below and between the coiled ignition leads, the feed lines, the blowbacks, just a few centimeters short of the crib tracks and a handsbreadth forward of the compensator gears, Dustin's body bent forward a trifle to fit the turret's curve. With straps across his chest and around his shoulders, with his throat lightly choked by his microphone and his ears gently touched by the inwalls of his helmet, with his wrist-braced hands lying just beside the turret controls, he had nothing to do but hang in the sky and watch the stars of hyperspace halating all around him. And to listen to his thoughts as much as he wished, so long as neither the watching nor the listening were of such intensity that he would fail to hear the scream of the turret alarm and slash his glance at the gunlayer controls in time to live—thus preserving the ship as long as possible.

Most of the time Dustin sang to himself as he sat there waiting, silent words and melody echoing in his mind:

*"Breastwork's dirty," the Cap'n said.*

*"Go clean it up." Wish he was dead.*

*I got blues. Breastwork blues.*

The song was something the Merchant Service had given him, from before the TSN changed its eligibility qualifications. Now he hung in his turret, isolated on a ship with three thousand men for crew, alone. And the pain in his throat was a thin, foggy nagging which disappeared when even the slightest other thing caught his attention. He sang the Deckplate Blues in his mind, to forget the pain in his throat.

*"Deck's all slick," the Mate he said.*

*"Go wipe it off." Wish he was dead.*

*I got blues. Deckplate blues.*

His glance sought the repeater dial of the ship's chronometer.... Three hours left in his five-hour GST watch. Twenty minutes before the watch ended the mother ship would sideslip back into Space Prime and, possibly, into action. Then there might be a change of watch, but probably not. It took too long for men to switch places in and out of a turret.

The new *Erie* Class ships had solid turrets, with the leads and blowbacks buried in the walls and screens instead of the transparency of the bubbles on the *Chesapeake* ships that made up the tangle that filled the turret and made it almost impossible to crawl out in less than three minutes.

But there were only four of the *Erie* ships so far and he'd probably never crew one in any case. The best ships and the best men went together. That meant he belonged on the *Baltimore*, protecting her flank with his Kelsey while she swung around the periphery of Sector Red and tried to sow her little interceptors where they would harass the Eglis fleet that anchored the enemy half of Red.

But his importance to the ship and the ship's importance to the TSN were things which he had long ago weighed, decided on, and forgotten.

He had three hours of duty left and all the TSN expected of him was the same thing it expected of the ship—the best of which he was capable, and let BUSPAC do the weighing. So, with three more lonely hours to fill he sang silently:

*Took in a rock, passin' Altair—*

*Bust up the hull, ruin the air.*

*I got blues. Spacesuit blues.*

He'd heard the song first at Flushing. Then through the years, each marked off by a voyage to a star, flaming and planet-wrapped, he had heard it with its countless verses. And as the Length of Service chart on his ticket grew fuller, he had sung it:

*Now the Mate's real sick,*

*And the Cap'n's dead—*

*But me in the spacesuit, scrubbin' the Head,*

*Surrounded by acres, and acres, and acres—*

*Fouled up in acres of steel.*

The song grew out of the loneliness and, at the same time, it filled the loneliness.

He was older than the other enlisted men in the crew, with the exception of a few Chiefs. Not much older—war in space is a young man's game—but the difference pushed him across the line that separated boys from men. And the song marked another difference—it was part of his life in the Merchant Service, something that had fitted itself to him through the years in a way of living that the other space men on this ship had not experienced.

The crewmen who had shared watches with him had heard him sing the song, but the grins on their faces when he finished that last verse had shown they hadn't understood its meaning at all.

So they called him Deckplate Dustin because of the song, or Old Deckplate. They grinned at him when he forgot and sang it aloud as he sat by himself in the turret. They weren't derisive about it—they merely acknowledged the difference, and respected it.

Most of them had never been this far from Flushing before, while he had actually twice ridden a ship into Eglis itself, before the war. He knew they envied him for it. And he envied them their careers in the clean, leaping TSN ship, driving out into the universe with the finest equipment man could provide, touching new worlds while they

## Absolute Magnitude

were still fresh and wonderful, not yet overlaid with transplanted culture that greeted the first of the Merchant Service ships.

It was the longing to see those new worlds in their untouched state that had caused him to leave his Merchant Service berth when the TSN restrictions had been modified, and join a space ship crew. The war had changed things and a man with a slightly unbalanced metabolism was a good enough risk for service in ships that might never come back. So they had taken him on six months ago, and made him a fin man.

He glanced at the chronometer again. Two hours and fifty-five minutes left. He began a new set of verses:

*"Paint's all burned," the Cap'n said.*

*"Freshen it up," Wish he was dead.*

*I got blues. Hullwork blues.*

If Space Prime is a barrel floating down a river at night, then hyperspace is the river. A ship punching through out of the barrel can never be sure of where in the river it would emerge, or how fast the current was running. It could only operate in relation to the barrel, riding the swifter current of hyperspace, then punching back into the barrel, knowing where it had come from and where it was going, but never finding out where it had been while it was in the river.

So what happened now was coincidence, one of the infrequent accidents that were slowly increasing in number as more and more ships on either side of the war broke out of the barrel and into the ebion swirling river.

The Egin ships floundered into hyperspace fifty thousand miles away. Even as the *Baltimore* resonated to the beating of her alarms, the Egin ships—four of them—fanned out after the first astonished moment of mutual discovery.

Dustin's gunlayer had already trained the turret's Kelsey on the most significant mass within its detection range. Now Dustin's corded fingers slapped down and overrode the gun's impulse to fire, for the detectors, of course, had behaved as detectors will at extreme range, indicated a resultant obtained from the four separate bodies of the Egin ships rather than pointing at any one of the shimmering hulls—hulls which were halating so badly that they were as visible as planets at that distance.

The four enemy ships were roughly equivalent to *Anzio* class destroyers. Dustin thought as he read the dials on the gunlayer. That meant they would stand no chance against the *Baltimore* in a gunnery duel. And no chance of any kind once the mother ship's interceptors were spaceborne. The attack had to be swift, had to come from several directions at once, had to be as vicious as possible, for it could not be repeated. It had to come now....

Dustin slid his feet restlessly in the stirrups, felt the tip of his tongue curl back and press against the roof of his mouth.

The four ships had been moving apart as they came toward the *Baltimore*. Now they snapped into courses that converged on the TSN ship, three of them suddenly disappearing from Dustin's sight while the fourth came on, was now almost directly above. Even his gunlayer ignored that one for the batteries on the hull would handle that problem decisively.

One of the other ships now arched up into his sight, coming from behind the *Baltimore*'s hull. The turret rocked a bit on its compensators as his Kelsey rolled over in its crib to follow the Egin. Dustin gave the gunlayer its head, his torso straining against the saddle straps as the Kelsey swung. He estimated his chances of hitting the Egin, knew they were very good, and left the gunnery to

the machines.

More than likely, he knew, a similar attack was being made on the other side of hull, with similar results. He wondered briefly if the fourth ship was attacking from below.

As his Kelsey fired and the Egin ship broke into wildly fluorescing particles before his eyes, he saw the fourth ship slash across the *Baltimore*'s bow, spew torpedoes and vanish. Aboard that ship, he knew, generators were fusing and men were dying, but what mattered was that the Egin had succeeded in shifting back into Space Prime without adequate regeneration of his field, for had the one-in-four chance taken effect, all of space would have blossomed open in front of the surging mother ship as the Egin detonated.

And even as he recognized the long-range failure of the mother ship's mission in the warning that the Egin now carried back to his fleet, the more immediate danger overtook him.

The other two Egin ships had long ago been reduced to pieces. Now the light automatics that studded the *Baltimore*'s body were twinkling with fire as they picked off the tumbling torpedoes the fourth ship had sown. Dustin watched the rippling surge ebb and flow as it wreathed the grey hull, and had no warning until the Kelsey suddenly reared in its crib that one of the missiles was actually close enough for its mass to activate the gunlayer. He rocked in the saddle, trying to find the torpedo with his daring eyes, but failed to see it because of the hulking Kelsey's breach.

Had it not been for the interruptor circuits the Kelsey would have fired and hulled the *Baltimore* even as it destroyed the torpedo. As it was, the missile punched through the fin some hundred and twenty meters away from the tip, exited into space again, then exploded its charge.

Now Dustin was even more alone in the sky, for the explosion severed the access tunnel, cut the interphone lines, and left him and the turret clinging to the main body of the ship by the warped central spar and such lacerated stanchions and plates as still formed a pitifully slender bridge between the remaining two hundred and fifty meters of fin and the askew section at whose tip he was.

Twenty minutes later a coded message began to wink at Dustin from the signal gun in Number Three turret. He read it easily, took his own gun from the rack behind his head and signalled back:

*Am uninjured. Turret operative.*

There was a pause, then the signals flashed again from Number Three turret.

*Maintain station. Repairs commencing. Relief soon as possible.*

Ack and out, Dustin acknowledged, and racked the gun. He nodded to himself, agreeing with his orders.

The turret was a self-contained unit with its own power-plant. Theoretically it could operate without direct connection to the ship for an indefinite period of time. Actually, this was true only so long as he, the fin man, could hold out. And there were no rations in the turret and only a small tank of water. But, if necessary his relief could come up over the undamaged section of the fin a spacesuit, entering the access tunnel at the break, or even coming all of the distance on the skin.

Under normal conditions the turret would probably have been left unmanned until the fin was repaired. But with the ship at Action Stations, and the almost certainty that the Egin fleet had an excellent idea of the *Baltimore*'s location, the mother ship's staff could not take such a chance. A turret on full auto was as likely to expend itself on a resultant or an already neutralized target as not.

## The Deckplate Blues

Frowning, Dustin planned his course of action in event of another attack. As long as his blowbacks were clear, the firing of the Kelsey would put no additional strain on the weakened spar. If another hit were to jam the blowbacks, however, his next shot would snap the end of the fin off with its recoil.

It was at this point that he discovered that the turret escape hatch had been jammed by the explosion.

His jaw tightened but his lips stretched into a grin as it did so. He strained one shoulder against its strap in a half-shrug.... Very few men ever made it through an escape hatch anyway. Of those who did, even fewer were ever picked up, and then usually only in fleet actions where torpedo and picket boats were numerous enough to make the chances of contact likely. But he could not imagine the *Baltimore*'s captain detaching any of his interceptors in the middle of a battle to follow a single man down....

The grin widened as he realized something else. With the interphone lines cut it didn't matter now if he sang aloud. So he added a new verse to the *Deckplate Blues*, singing aloud:

*"Stay where you are," says Cap'n dear.*

*Wish I was him, and he was here.*

*I got blues. Strategic blues.*

He did not consider the jammed hatch as being of sufficient importance to require a report. If Number Three turret signalled him again he'd mention it then. With that thought disposed of he went back to his lonely thoughts while the *Baltimore* plunged on through hyperspace at undiminished speed, and the gunlayer's detectors combed the sky.

Apparently the BUSPAC tests were more effective than the average TSN man would admit, Dustin thought as he rode among the stars in his transparent turret. They'd shown him up as a man so used to loneliness that he could be assigned to a finiturret, with the ship itself almost a fifth of a mile away and nothing for company except the stars—fiery fire cold in Space Prime, violet-haloed in hyperspace.

Or had they dug deeper than that and found the *source* of his loneliness? Had the tests and the IBM cards found the boy who was born three blocks away from Flushing spaceport, who had ridden the big ships in his mind long before his feet had ever touched the metal of a deck?

And had the tests uncovered, in a half-day, what it had taken him ten years to find out for himself—that only the first few pioneers see the stars as they really are, and that those few carry the tainted seed of longing with them forevermore? The longing to be always first—always there where man has not yet touched.

What makes a man go into space if it is not a hunger for something that man has not touched? and what does a man feel when he discovers that only the first few ever outrace the tide which they themselves bring with them? And if a man wants to leave Earth behind, then he is lonely among all things which are of Earth....

Had Dustin been a rich man he would have bought his own ship and driven deep into the unknown sky. Had he been a scientist a grant would have given him the ship. Had he been older he would have been Captain of a ship, and that would have done as well—if he could have gone without a crew.

But he was neither rich, nor a scientist, nor a captain.... He was simply lonely.

The TSN, wittingly or otherwise, had done the best it could for him. BUSPAC could not trust him with a ship of his own, for even a torpedo boat's destiny cannot be entrusted to a man whose glandular chemistry might never allow him to complete his mission. So they had put him on

the finiturret of a *Chesapeake* class mother ship, and Dustin was grateful for the loneliness they had given him.

The chronometer repeater had cut out with the severance of the line into the ship. But Dustin guessed that the ship was near its sideslip point, and the signal gun that winked now from Number Three bore him out:

*Sideslip now plus five. Battle stations.*

Dustin grinned as he acknowledged. Actually, the Captain could have ordered the message spelled out in a letter code, in which case the phrase would probably have read *Be on the alert*. But the familiar *red-red-red* of Battle Stations was just as good.

But the significance of the phrase was not lost on him. It indicated that the *Baltimore* was proceeding according to plan, despite the fact that the Eglin fleet must have been warned and would probably be waiting for the mother ship to break into Space Prime.

He let the Kelsey roam in its crib, covering an almost perfect sphere of space, restricted only by the interruptor circuits which kept it from firing whenever its range impinged on any part of the ship, and by the thin wedge of fin into which the turret was mounted. As he expected even the most violent movement of the massive weapon, when damped by the turret compensators, imposed no strain on the damaged fin. But if the ship made any violent maneuvers in battle, the turret's inertia would easily snap it free. But the grin did not leave his lips....

The men who had been working on the torn fin disappeared and Dustin saw the hatches retracting away from the wells in which the interceptors were berthed. A group of test missiles for the automatics showered out to all sides of the ship, cut off their recog fields, and were speared out of existence by the rippling fire from along the hull.

When the *Baltimore* slipped into Space Prime the Eglin fleet was waiting for it. Fire from a battleship hit along the TSN ship's port bow and a pack of destroyers moved in, weaving a pattern which was intended to furnish the Kelsey gunlayers with only resultants to fire at.

Dustin's lips tightened. That tactic was the reason why turrets carried gunner's. He cancelled out the gunlayer's attempts to fire into empty space, threw in the best-of-three circuits, and saw the stars spin as the gunlayer, forced to find a target under specified conditions, rolled the Kelsey and snapped test bursts at a resultant and two other readings at equal distances from it. Where a destroyer had been the gunlayer now read diminished mass. He fired again, this time decisively.

The interceptors broke away from the *Baltimore*'s hull and began picking their targets. But their entire purpose was being destroyed even as they fulfilled it.

The *Baltimore* was being hit repeatedly. Dustin saw a string of torpedoes break through the hedge of fire from the automatics and explode inside the hull, blacking out all the starboard automatics, blowing out a hull turret, and smashing one of the retracted hatches over the interceptor bay.

The only reason that the TSN ship was not pounded to pieces immediately was because the Eglin fleet knew only that the mother ship would emerge in Space Prime, but had not been able to cup a specific position.

Now the *Baltimore* was being engaged by a battleship and a destroyer squadron. Dustin could see cruisers and an Eglin mother ship bearing down on them, and a group of torpedo boats swinging in on the TSN ship's star side, while interceptors from the Eglin ship were forming attack flights and pouncing on the TSN interceptors.

He let the gunlayer go back into full automatic as the Eglin ships swarmed in closer. The Kelsey was firing almost constantly into a haze of mass-readings that half-blinded the gunlayer and cut the percentage of hits to a figure lower than anything Dustin had ever heard of. But best-of-

## Absolute Magnitude

three gunnery was far too slow at *this* range, and anything was better than full manual.

His mouth was full of ashes. In another moment the *Baltimore* would either have to jump back into hyperspace, depending on its big generators to stand the strain of a sudden surge in the field, or it would have to swing ship. If it did the latter, it might be possible to disengage the Eglins temporarily as their own inertia carried them past the mother ship. But the turret would never make the swing with the rest of the ship.

He analyzed the situation as best he could... If the *Baltimore* swung, she might be able to beat off the lighter Eglin ships in a running fight, leaving the slower battleship behind. But the cruisers and the enemy mother ship would eventually catch her. And the end result would be that the Eglin fleet would suffer no significant losses.

On the other hand, if the *Baltimore* went back into hyperspace it was entirely possible that she might escape to return at a later date, or, at least get back to a TSN base. With the fighting going on at the present pace, none of the lighter Eglin ships could hope to devote their generators to a sideslip. By the time they did, the TSN ship would be far enough away to be safe.

The flaw in the latter course was that the battleship and the mother ship certainly could, and would, follow the *Baltimore*. Even some of the cruisers might try it. And seventy five percent of those that did try would succeed.

The TSN interceptors were being slaughtered as they tried to break through to the Eglin battleship. A few of them did succeed in penetrating the outer barrage of fire laid down by the big ship's turrets. But the tiny bombs which the Eglins used against the TSN's automatics caught them all before any serious damage was effected on the Eglin vessel.

The *Baltimore* took another hit forward. It opened her bow and Dustin saw men and equipment cascading out of the gaping wound.

Now he knew the *Baltimore* would not swing. Her forward steering assembly had been carried away by that hit. The mother ship would have to try and make hyperspace, taking her chances with the two big Eglin ships.

Dustin did something then that no gunner in his right mind ever did. He ripped the safety cover off the Kelsey's access and inspection panel, found the proper wires with his groping fingers and tore them out of their connections. He probed further and inactivated the gunlayer. There was nothing he could do about the interruptor circuits. They were printed into the firing mechanism itself. Mutiny was always a consideration in naval architecture.

Then he lined the Kelsey up manually, fired at the shadowy bulk of a cruiser that was drilling in on his flank.

The recoil of the big Kelsey slammed against the rib. The turret compensators took all they could and transmitted the shock to the fin itself. The vibration pounded down the fin until it came to the gap the first torpedo had torn, and to the slender metal thread that bridged the gap.

The fin-end peeled away from the remaining stub, carrying the turret with it. And as it floundered through space the *Baltimore* ran away from it. Even with a sound fin, a turret gun with its blowbacks inactivated had been known to tear its turret free.

Dustin choked on a cough as he cleared the blood out of his mouth. The stars were dipping and looping in almost solid streamers as the turret and fin-end tumbled through the sky like a blown leaf, still holding to the *Baltimore*'s scourge but fluttering erratically with the motion it had acquired from the recoil and the subsequent reaction against the ship as the fin tore free.

Dustin's fingers began to fly over the Kelsey's controls. The gun rolled along its axis as rapidly as the drivers could spin it, and the turret gradually built up a stable rotational axis, turning in the opposite direction. It was the far lighter carriage, spinning within the crib, that

was responsible for the gyroscopic action, rather than the weight of the gun itself. The gun would do its part later.

He spun the carriage in the opposite direction, waiting until the turret's motion around the axis of the gun had stopped. He got a glimpse of the *Baltimore*, then found the Eglin battleship. He aimed the Kelsey hard, ignoring the reaction on the part of the turret and fin-end, and fired.

The turret skidded around at right angles to its previous rotational axis. The battleship and the *Baltimore* vanished from Dustin's sight, then reappeared as the turret continued to spin, disappeared once more, he tracked the gun as far to the left as possible, hoping that the interrupter circuits—not knowing that the ship they guarded was no longer there—would not find part of the phantom in Kelsey's line of fire. He punched the firing stud and felt the turret slew around. It drifted slowly clockwise, almost all its motion around the turret axes negated, still traveling along the *Baltimore*'s course at a fraction of the mother ship's speed.

The signal gun winked from Number Three turret, still on the stub that projected from the receding ship. He grinned as he read the message: *Deckplate! What are you doing?*

Morgan, locked in his own turret was flicking the letter code out into space as fast as his fingers could trip the stud. Dustin grinned, yanked his own gun out of the rack, sent back:

*Don't stay to see the fun. It's beddy-bye for you. Go sleep in the deep.*

He racked the gun with a chuckle, and almost as if the last message had gone to the *Baltimore*'s staff instead of to the gunner, the TSN ship winked out of Space Prime.

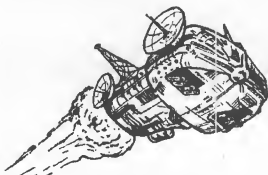
Dustin's breath came through his nose, now, and he was feeling the fire in his chest where not even the harness had been able to keep his ribs from breaking under the impact of those three uncushioned shocks.

The Eglin battleship lay dead ahead of him now. He trained the Kelsey on its stern steering assembly, knowing there would be only one shot before he would have to repeat all the wild maneuvers of the last two minutes—knowing that even if Eglins gave him time, the target would no longer be there, for the battleship would have followed the *Baltimore* into hyperspace. Then, aided by the enemy mother ship, it would tear the slashed TSN ship to shreds.

but here he was, one man alone in space, navigating his own ship, with only enemies around him. For this was Eglin space. No touch of Earth lay across it now, and no other Earthman stood besides him to block his view of the stars.

He fired and the stern assembly of the Eglin battleship vanished. A charging destroyer detonated the turret's power pile at the same instant....

But no man has ever again served on a TSN ship without learning the Deckplate Blues.





Geoffrey A. Landis received a Hugo in 1990. This is his second appearance in *Absolute Magnitude*.

# The Melancholy of Infinite Space

by Geoffrey A. Landis

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We live at the very beginning of the Universe.

As we peer back with our telescopes towards the beginning of time, and measure the age of the universe, we are beginning to find that the universe is closer to ten billion years old than to fifty: that the oldest of the stars we see around us are, in fact, as old as any star *can* be; as old as the universe itself. Looking outward we are finding that the gravity of the universe is not enough to pull it back together in some future cataclysmic big-crunch. The universe will expand forever.

Ten billion years. A mere eyblink in the cosmic time. We stand at the beginning of time, looking outward into the void of infinite time.

And what of us?

We have no guarantees. Humanity has spread across the globe; populated ecosystems from the equatorial rain forest to the polar ice, but as a species we are new, a species barely a hundred thousand years old. This is far too young for us to begin to guess whether Darwin's awful mill will judge us a success, or whether we will be wiped away as another dead end, one of a million failed experiments. The Earth has no memory for the dead-ends of evolution. In a few hundred thousand years glaciers would grind our works and our bones into gravel, would grind gravel into sand, and in a few hundred million years the movement of continents erase the last of any trace of our brief existence, save perhaps for a handful of deeply-buried and enigmatic fossils.

But some species survive, and perhaps we will be among them. A species might last a million years, even ten million years, and who can say that we will not be among those rare evolutionary successes, with success judged by that cruel god who knows no mercy or kindness, only death or survival? And in a million years, or even ten thousand years, who can tell what we shall become? All we can say is that we will become something unguessable, possibly unimaginable.

Very few species last more than ten million years, and those few are the living fossils, the ones frozen by evolution into some marginal niche. A genus may last longer, and perhaps genus homo will last a hundred million years or more. There would, then, in time be other species of humans, radiating into other ecological niches. But even genera evolve or are supplanted; and in life, nothing lasts. It is unlikely that genus homo will last a billion years. A billion years ago, even multi-celled life had yet to evolve; there were no plants, no animals, no fungus, only primitive bacteria. A billion years hence, we cannot guess what life will be like, but it will no more be us than we are those primitive bacteria.

The sun itself is middle-aged, halfway through its life. In another five billion years, give or take a few, the sun will swell into a red giant—incidentally melting the Earth as it does—and then shrink to a

white dwarf, a dying ember of a sun. In twenty billion years the ember will cool. A few trillion years from now, all the stars in the universe will be cold. Perhaps if we (or rather our billion-times great grandchildren, as much different from us as we are beyond bacteria) learn to conserve star-stuff, and make smaller stars that conserve their hydrogen fuel and burn slowly, perhaps we shall prolong the death of the final stars, to make them last ten times or even a hundred times longer before the end of all starshine comes. A hundred trillion years!

And so the universe cools and expands.

Some say that perhaps even protons, the very stuff of matter itself, will decay with time. But our best experiments to search for such decays have failed to see it, and so it may well be that the matter that we are made of will have no such easy oblivion.

And yet the universe cools and expands. In the cold dark, whirling orbits of the cinders that were once stars will collapse by gravitational radiation. A billion times longer than that hundred trillion years, and galaxies collapse into black holes. A thousand times that, and the universe is swept free of all matter.

In another  $10^{48}$  years, give or take, even the black holes evaporate into clouds of gamma rays, and then the gamma rays are stretched by the expansion of the universe into visible, then microwaves, then radio. There is nothing in the universe save a cooling, expanding cloud of dilute photons.

Life, complexity, is the natural child of entropy, the slide of energy to lower states. Life is not made of protoplasm, despite what biologists may say; the necessary stuff of life is not matter, but information, and the life-stuff of information is not energy, but entropy. We are surfers on entropy; we live by forever sliding on the cusp of the ever-collapsing wave. As the universe expands, that slide of entropy continues forever, and complexity must follow. There is no end.

In that infinitely-distant universe of nothing but photons, flying endlessly across the expanding cold, there is still energy, and in the expansion of photons into a universe expanding and cooling toward absolute zero, there is still the endless slide of entropy. With entropy is the stuff of life, and even of intelligence. Over the time scale for the universe to expand, life goes on. At this time scale, long after the end of the galaxies, long after the universe of matter, comes the universe of photons. In that unimaginably huge universe, a hundred trillion years is less than the blink of an eye.

Here is where deep time really begins. But there will be no trace of us, of our brief existence in that hundred trillion years that was the very first eyblink of the new universe. Not even the atoms that once made us will remain.

We live at the very beginning of the universe.





Don D'Amassa is the author of *Blood Beast* from Pinnacle Horror. His short work has appeared in *Tomorrow*, *Expanse*, and *Harsh Mistress*, an earlier incarnation of *Absolute Magnitude*. He is a fiction reviewer for *Science Fiction Chronicle*.

## Empirical Facts

by Don D'Amassa

I realized we'd miscalculated our negotiating posture when the Knessi ambassador leaped across the table and bit off Kari Sheldon's right hand. The senior member of the human delegation stared down at her mangled arm for several seconds with a puzzled expression, then swayed as shock overwhelmed her physical resources. She was already losing consciousness by the time we overcame our own momentary paralysis. Victor had a pressure pad around the stump within seconds and I found enough voice to request an adjournment.

"We wish to consider your objection to our proposal in some detail before responding." My voice was unsteady, but the Knessi had given no indication they were sensitive to human emotional states.

Ambassador Gnocki scratched at the distinctive scar that disfigured his chest while the Giovanni interpreter translated Terran standard to whatever passed for language among the Knessi. They always used Giovanni to communicate with "lesser" races, and our intelligence services insisted that information was being passed by means other than simple sounds. Too much data was communicated in very brief exchanges to admit of any other explanation. Limited telepathy was a common but unsubstantiated theory although no one had come up with a plausible scenario in which three meter tall, scale-armored predators with horny beaks would have developed such an ability.

There were a lot of things we didn't understand about the Knessi, things we needed to learn in a hurry if the human race was going to survive, let alone prosper.

"Should we take her back to the ship or use the local facilities?" Janis Fong remained, as usual, calm and collected. Officially she was an observer, not a diplomat, but we all knew she represented the military. The high command still hadn't accepted the fact that their hundred or so warships amounted to little compared to an empire that reportedly controlled many thousands of star systems. According to Glakker, the Giovanni liaison assigned to us, the several dozen dreadnoughts accompanying Ambassador Gnocki represented the usual escort for a minor ambassador.

"And these their most current ships are not, Human Alan Nkruma. Gnocki a scandal has committed. Many powerful enemies among his people has he made, and they to this remote and unimportant frontier region have him exiled." Our reconnaissance holo supported his claim that these were not state of the art warships. Several of them clearly were in sore need of drydocking and a refit.

I suddenly realized that I was in charge of the delegation, at least until Kari came around. "We'll use our own. The Knessi would probably interpret it as a sign of weakness if we asked for their help."

"We're not exactly negotiating from a position of strength anyway, Alan." Victor's voice was tinged with barely controlled panic.

"All the more reason not to relinquish whatever dignity remains to us."

The Knessi wouldn't rise until we'd departed. To do so would, as we understood their psychology, concede to us some degree of ownership of these chambers. Knessi, for all their technological superiority, were clearly still influenced by their more primitive natures. They were fiercely territorial, their lives were governed by elaborate and pervasive rituals, and they consumed most of their food by hunting it down, usually in special preserves they built on every world they occupied.

I hoped fervently that Kari's hand gave the ambassador indignation.

Victor used his cyberwand to neutralize the security shield protecting our quarters and we carried Sheldon to the med unit. Once our head of mission was sedated and under treatment, I called a staff meeting to consider our options. Victor Knabbi seemed more agitated than ever, Janis Fong her usual imperturbable self, the remaining dozen members of the delegation scattered across the intervening spectrum.

"I think we should request a delay to consult with our superiors." Everett Carr was, in my opinion, ill suited for this assignment, had questioned every initiative we'd suggested since arriving in the Delta Pavonis system.

"It may come to that," I conceded, "but I'd like to hear some alternatives first."

"We could withdraw in protest," Janis suggested mildly. "It looks to me like Gnocki is trying to prove he's an alpha male and can't be dominated. Sometimes bullies fold when their bluff is called."

"That fleet out there is hardly a bluff," argued Victor.

"It's a formidable but not insurmountable obstacle," conceded Janis. "Our analysis indicates we could take them, though with significant losses. I'd prefer it not come to that, but we do have to recognize that our fleet provides a credible threat and we could have them in this system in a matter of days."

"They'd be able to handle the ambassador's entourage, perhaps, but it wouldn't take the Knessi long to bring additional forces from other systems. We don't have any idea of their true strength in this region." It was Everett again, more agitated than ever. "Don't forget what happened to the Passaqualia and the Denovans."

"We only have the Knessi's word for that."

"The Giovanni, actually," I interrupted. "And if it's true, there aren't any Passaqualia or Denovans left to ask about it."

Glakker was fluent and communicative and had demonstrated an extraordinary willingness to discuss the past exploits of the race he served. "The Knessi no weakness or mercy have," he'd told us. "Once another great empire they encountered. The Llyriani many hundreds of planets controlled and a fleet of ships more powerful

## Absolute Magnitude

even than that of the Knessi was assembled. But the Knessi after many hundreds of planets died to cease fighting refused. The Llyriani to end the slaughter finally surrendered."

I'd felt a degree of admiration for the Knessi despite their menace when Glakker told us that story, but he'd chilled our blood with its sequel. "The Llyriani to disband their military agreed, and their entire species later executed was. The Knessi could not any future threat accept."

There was uncomfortable tension as we tried to decide on a course of action. I let the staff argue for a while until it was clear that we were split into two camps. Everett, Victor, and Alis Lee wanted to withdraw from negotiations and kick the problem upstairs. With the exception of Janis Fong and Sirash Ngui, the remainder wanted me to keep the discussion alive but stagnant until Kari was able to return to duty. Janis kept her own council after her initial comments, and I had the distinct impression she was holding something back. Sirash was an historian who was supposed to be recording our mission for posterity; he had no official standing but had always struck me as intelligent and perceptive, though reluctant to express an opinion.

"All right, I think we've done all we can for now. I'm going to confer with Glakker and see if he has anything constructive to offer. Gnocki won't agree to another session today anyway so let's think about our options and hope Kari's able to give us some guidance tomorrow." She would be physically capable of returning to duty within twenty-four hours, but if I'd been in her position, I'm not sure I'd have stepped into a room with Gnocki again. He might still be hungry.

Glakker was perfectly willing to discuss the situation with me, in my quarters or his. Curious, I suggested the latter.

Delta Pavonis is a fairly new Knessi acquisition. There are, according to Glakker and our own sketchy intelligence, less than a dozen of the master race on the fourth planet, along with two hundred Giovanni and several thousand Miri, a small, quasi-mammalian species with limited intelligence but an apparently limitless capacity for work. The Miri provided all of the menial labor in the colony, but were regarded by even the Giovanni as little more than bright animals. Glakker told me that once fully developed, the planet would be home to something on the order of a hundred Knessi and that the other populations would swell proportionately.

"The Knessi no more on a single world this size will allow. To each a certain amount of land must given be, and other sufficient to hold many thousands of servants must aside be held." The dependence on what amounted to little more than slave labor in such a highly developed culture was anomalous, but Glakker had told the ambassador and I that it was a matter of prestige rather than actual physical dependence. "The Knessi always their personal power must prove."

Giovanni buildings were invariably single story. According to Glakker, this was because it would shame a Knessi to ever have to lift its eyes to see a member of a lesser species, but I thought it might just as easily derive from the Miri's racial fear of heights. According to Glakker, they originated on a featureless planet covered with grasslands and hadn't progressed much beyond wheels and levers at the time they were incorporated into the Knessi empire. The Giovanni might be a subject species themselves, but they were clearly willing to exploit someone even lower in the pecking order.

I found Glakker's quarters easily from his directions, and was ushered by a Miri into a plainly furnished room that could have been

home to a human being if one ignored the squatting chamber in the dining area and the fact that there was no way to close off the entranceway. The Giovanni defecated openly and expressed amusement with our human preoccupation with privacy. The lack of a door was a product of what our intelligence interpreted as a racial claustrophobia.

"Greetings, Human Alan Nkruma."

"Greetings, Giovanni Glakker Besarra Nakar."

"Today's session disagreeable was."

I nodded, then answered affirmatively. The Giovanni were good at picking up non-verbal cues but sometimes they misunderstood their implications. "Have we somehow distressed the Knessi?"

Glakker clicked his tongues together but I had no idea whether it was an expression of sympathy, frustration, or possibly humor. "Even now, the Knessi we Giovanni do not always understand."

"How long have your people worked for the Knessi?"

"Almost one hundred generations have we served." That made it about five thousand years. I shook my head in amazement.

"Belief in my statement you lack?" I could tell by the fibrillation of his dorsal crest that Glakker was agitated.

"No, not at all." Glakker had misinterpreted my gesture as a negative. "I was expressing my own difficulty assimilating this data."

"Serving the Knessi advantages provides. Giovanni worlds by other races were sometimes attacked. Now the Knessi's protection has our shield been. We the first of their servants are."

"Of course." I wondered if I'd ever be able to tell whether or not Glakker was sincere in his loyalty to the Knessi. I wanted to believe that there was smoldering resentment here as well, that the rule of the Knessi was not as absolute as we'd been led to believe.

"Then the Giovanni were the first race the Knessi encountered?"

"The Giovanni the first allowed to survive were," was the disturbing answer. "Knessi because we could speak to them our presence tolerated. To stay in your own region of space and avoid contact better is."

"But we know there are unexplored systems in this region, thousands of them. Surely the Knessi will allow us to expand away from their sphere of influence."

"Knessi all other races suspect find. If continue to expand you insist, your destruction they eventually seek will."

I thought about that. "You're saying there's no room for negotiation at all here, only surrender. My people aren't likely to find that acceptable."

"Few other paths to consider exist."

I returned to our quarters a short time later, profoundly disturbed and acutely depressed.

Kari Sheldon was conscious and articulate the following morning, but she had no intention of returning to the negotiations immediately. "Let's see how the Ambassador reacts to being forced to deal with a subordinate for a while." She gave me an apologetic look. "Our best analysis is that this is something of a pissing contest, so maybe we can put Gnocki off his feed for a while." She grimaced as she realized what she'd just said, but pushed on.

"We need more information. Any word from your sources, Janis?"

"Very little. We've sent flitterships to some of the systems the Knessi claim, but we haven't found any of their military bases as yet."

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This was news to me and I frowned. "The Giovanni have warned us about provocative acts. If the Knessi find out we've been spying on them..."

"We'll be no worse off than we are already," Janis let her calm exterior ruffle a bit for the first time in my experience. "There's still a chance this is all just a shell game."

"I'm not following this." I wasn't.

Kari uneasily shifted her wounded hand. "Alan, we have reason to believe that the Knessi forces in this area of space aren't as numerous as we've been led to believe."

"You mean the Giovanni have been lying to us?"

"Not necessarily. But they're an enslaved people, have been for centuries. The Knessi clearly don't consider them allies and aren't likely to have told them everything."

"All right, it's a dangerous game, but I suppose it's worth playing. So what do we do next?"

"We stall for a while, see what happens. I've already called off today's session, and you'll be sitting in for me tomorrow, Alan."

I was, I admit it, flummoxed. As second in command of the mission, I should have known what our policy was beforehand. Obviously Janis Fong's role was more than just advisory, in fact, I began to wonder if she might not actually be Sheldon's superior. It would explain her occasional deference to the "advisor" during staff meetings. Child shily, I sulked in my quarters for the rest of the brief day, waiting until darkness fell across the Giovanni "city", which in human terms wasn't much more than a small town.

Then I sneaked out.

We weren't supposed to leave the government complex without a Giovanni guide, theoretically for our own protection, particularly at night. "Knessi in darkness sometimes hunt. For this purpose the forest south of our city aside is set, but sometimes the rule disregarded is. No one but Knessi forbid each other can."

Pedestrian traffic had almost entirely ceased. The Giovanni had very poor night vision, and since much of their language was conducted by visual cues, they found it difficult to function in the darkness. Miri slept almost catatonically when darkness fell, and I saw them curled up into balls everywhere I looked.

The night's silence was palpable.

I didn't have a specific goal in mind; I was just determined to commit a small, personal rebellion. To this day I'm not certain whether I was acting against the tyranny of the Knessi or the wishes of my superiors, neither of whom had been entirely forthright of late.

I headed north, away from the hunting preserve, toward the Knessi compound.

Although we'd scanned the area from space, we'd come planetside in a Giovanni piloted shuttle. Human spacecraft were restricted to an orbit well distant from the planet's hidden defense systems. Ambassador Grocki was ensconced in the largest of three Knessi enclaves, each surrounded by meter thick walls of a ceramic material, small fortresses with only a single entrance.

"The Knessi creatures of tradition are," explained Giovanni. "only in the pattern of their early civilization do they build."

If true I presumed the Knessi home world must have been, might still be, a place of constant violence. The entrance was narrow, guarded by Giovanni during the daylight, shielded by an energy shell in the darkness. Absently I pointed my cyberwand in its direction and cycled through a range of frequencies, not really expecting anything to happen.

The shell flickered and dissipated.

For a moment, I wanted to turn and run like hell, run all the way back to my quarters and hide under the bed. But curiosity is a powerful human trait, and I was feeling sorry for myself because I'd been left out of the information loop by my superiors, and finally I said what the hell and went inside.

There was a single, blocklike building within the compound, its material of construction the same as that of the outer walls. There were no windows, and once again a single entrance which, like Giovanni structures, seemed to have no door.

I crossed the open space and entered there as well. It was much bigger on the inside than on the outside, because the interior was cut into the ground, a recessed chamber surrounded by a balcony on all sides. Ambassador Knessi stood below me, his ragged scar unmistakable, and he wasn't happy.

He was in fact chained to one wall while a half dozen Giovanni stood a few meters away, gesticulating and speaking rapidly and simultaneously in their own language. They didn't appear to be particularly pleased either, and I had a feeling they'd be even less so if they discovered me spying on them.

Because in that split second, I understood what had been bothering me about the entire Knessi-Giovanni setup.

It didn't make sense.

Don't get me wrong. I know that when there's a confrontation between individuals, might often prevails over reason, muscle over intellect, the claw over the brain. Sometimes, for short periods, the same holds true in the relations between nations and, presumably, between sentient races. But the Knessi just weren't bright enough to maintain an interstellar empire for scores of generations, no matter how superior they were as warriors. They weren't smart enough to create sophisticated weaponry. Possibly they confiscated some from their subject peoples, but a race so bound by tradition would be unlikely to adapt readily to an entirely new style of warfare.

The Knessi weren't the master race; it was the Giovanni who were calling the shots.

I sneaked out of the Knessi compound without being discovered and returned to the Terran quarters.

Sheldon was officially outraged and unofficially offended that I'd disobeyed orders and "endangered the entire mission". Janis Fong was noncommittal, but treated me with considerably more respect afterwards. While she never actually admitted it, I think she admired my audacity, even if she suspected that it resulted from pique rather than courage.

She sent a coded message to our command ship that same evening.

Given this new perspective, the military's flitterships changed the focus of their intelligence gathering missions and stepped up their clandestine operation while we allowed the Giovanni to drag out negotiations on Delta Pavonis. Delay worked in our favor. I spent as much time as possible with Glakker, who seemed convinced that I was swallowing his story without reservation.

The Giovanni were clearly disconcerted when our fleet arrived in force a month later, and we in turn were surprised when the purportedly seasoned Knessi fleet surrendered almost without firing a shot. We'd learned that the empire had a hollow center, but hadn't expected to discover that most of the bristling weapon bays were mockups, or that those guns which were functional had almost no ammunition.

Two years passed before I ran into Janis Fong again.

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My career had progressed well despite what my superiors called "a distressing lack of respect for his superiors". The Knessi "empire" was revealed as less than two hundred worlds, each of which hastily surrendered to the first human ship to appear in its skies. The Knessi themselves turned out to be only marginally sapient, clever domesticated animals the Govanni had transformed into the bogyman to overawe less than two dozen other species, most of which welcomed human intervention with open arms, or other appropriate appendages. The Llyriani, Passaqualia, and Denovans turned out to be entirely fictional.

I was vacationing on Wunderbar when I ran into Janis Fong quite by accident. She invited me out for a stim, one thing led to another, eventually to some clumsy but ultimately satisfying sex in her suite.

"Tell me something, Janis," I said quietly after we'd recovered from our exertions. "It was really you in charge back there on Delta Pavonis, wasn't it? Sheldon was just a figurehead."

At first I didn't think she was going to answer, then she laughed and threw her head back against the pillow. "Actually, we had equal authority. Sirash was calling the shots."

"Sirash? The historian?"

"That's right. We already knew there was something fishy in the Knessi-Govanni setup. Too many inconsistencies. Too few hard facts. For one thing, if the Knessi were as all powerful as we'd been led to believe, it would have been much easier to find their installations. So it was decided that we should wrap ourselves in layers of deception as well."

"So my great discovery really wasn't all that important after all?"

She hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. "It helped, but we were pretty close to reaching that conclusion from external evidence anyway. Fortunately we took the right action despite our mistake."

"Mistake?"

Her face tightened, then relaxed. "What the hell, it'll be made public soon anyway. Will you promise not to repeat this until it does?"

"I've taken the oath of confidentiality." I was still in the diplomatic corps, to the dismay of my superiors.

"The Govanni weren't really in charge either."

"But the Knessi are barely sapient."

"About chimpanzee level, that's right."

"Then who..."

"The Miri. They're a lot brighter than we thought."

"But I've been on their home planet. They don't even have a technological culture. Almost every artifact I saw there was brought from offworld."

Janis nodded. "Their planet has almost no accessible metals. They were largely nomadic until the Govanni landed and enslaved them. When their aptitude for technology became obvious, the Govanni saw a way to free themselves from performing most of the actual work in their society. They're real snobs about that, you know; that's why they stressed that the Knessi wanted to enslave their neighbors. They thought all species would feel the same way."

"Anyway, they enforced a breeding program and slowly replaced their own people in increasingly skilled professions. We're not sure exactly how long it took for the balance of power to shift. The Govanni themselves didn't realize they were no longer masters of their own society. Some don't admit it even now."

That was nearly thirty years ago. The Terran Empire stretches across eight hundred star systems and includes thirty-nine intelligent

species now. Earth itself is the bustling capital of an expansive, thriving, multi-racial culture, and we humans are clearly proud of the society we've created.

But now that I'm retired, independently wealthy, and have the leisure to write the memoirs I've planned for most of my adult lifetime, those early years seem even more significant. I recall the computer error that prevented us from launching an ill-conceived economic assault on the Triashi Federation, the crash landing of the *Potemkin* that killed the leaders of the Revanchist Party and averted a disastrous internal conflict, and the revelation that Morgan Tetsui was secretly manipulating currency exchanges to repress the economies of certain worlds. A Miri programmed the computer, another piloted the *Potemkin*, and Tetsui employed an almost entirely Miri staff because they were so "reliable".

And I wonder whose empire this really is.



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Jamie Wild's first published piece appeared in the Newcomer's Corner in **Absolute Magnitude** #4. In addition to writing short stories, he plays lead guitar in a heavy metal band. This is his second appearance in our pages.

## Behavior Unbecoming an Officer

by Jamie Wild

Major Tom Anderson glanced at his digital wrist watch, 0400 hours. Davis sure was taking his time about this. Hopefully he'd make his move soon. Anderson had written off all hope of getting any sleep this night. If he won, he'd have to assume the responsibility of command immediately and there were a lot of changes to be made; if he lost, he'd never need sleep again.

The quiet sounds of a bogus craps game floated to Anderson. His people, he was sure, were being quite diligent, though sometimes it sounded as if the stakes were for real.

"Hey, you son-of-a-bitch, why don't you watch where you're going!"

Those were the code words, time for action. Anderson slid from his bunk as the deck erupted into chaos. Davis' people were suddenly all very occupied and Davis seemed to be unsure of what was going on. Anderson considered moving right in, but decided not to. It would be better to wait until Davis' goons were put down and more of the crew were awake. He wanted as many people as possible to see this. And if everyone saw him and Davis going one on one alone, they might not connect Anderson with the brawl that had left Davis standing by himself.

When it appeared that Davis' men were all down for the count, Anderson stepped forward. "So what do we have here? Looks like a deck rat."

Apparently Davis wasn't as dumb as he looked, Anderson saw concern cross his brows. "What the hell's going on here?"

"Going on here? Nothing unusual, I'm just getting ready to take out the garbage."

"You son-of-a-bitch," Davis said quietly, then, "all right, asshole, let's do it."

Anderson dropped into his fighting crouch and moved towards Davis. Anderson could see that Davis had had training at some point, he wasn't just a brawler. That complicated things, as Davis was considerably bigger and heavier than Anderson. There was nothing, beyond trusting in his own training, that he could do about that now.

Davis fired off a quick left hook and followed it up with a vicious right cross. Anderson directed the hook away from his body and ducked under the right cross. While ducking he moved inside and landed two quick body blows before moving back outside. Score one for Anderson. Davis was definitely stronger than Anderson, but speed could make up for a lot. Davis stepped back, more surprised than dazed, and seemed to reassess Anderson. At this point, Anderson was still content to let Davis come at him. Counter-punching was always safer when fighting a big man. Davis moved back in. Tom gave a bit of ground as he blocked a flurry of blows and landed another shot of his own. It was beginning to look as if Davis' size might not be a factor after all.

The next time Davis came at him he didn't stop when his blows failed to land. Anderson tagged him six times, but Davis, bleeding heavily from the nose and mouth, managed to get a hand on Anderson. Anderson tried to get away, but Davis pulled him into a bear hug. This was not good. The two wrestled about for a moment, then Davis pinned both of Anderson's arms to his side and lifted him off of the ground. The squeezing began immediately. Anderson felt his breath being forced from his lungs, and he knew, in a detached sort of way, that his ribs wouldn't hold out very long under this kind of force. Anderson struggled for a moment trying to get free, but it was useless. He was beginning to see red, and he knew that he had to do something quickly. With no other option, Anderson aimed a head butt at Davis' nose. He was rewarded with a solid thud and a grunt from Davis, but Davis' hold didn't loosen up a bit. Desperate for air, Anderson head butted Davis again. This time, Davis' grip loosened just a bit. Anderson shifted his arms and pushed. Davis lost his grip and Anderson slammed into the floor. Before Anderson could move Davis was on him. It was an improvement, if slight.

Anderson moved quickly to avoid being pinned. He got a handful of Davis' hair and pulled on it. It worked and he was able to roll clear and get back to his feet. That had been very close. Davis was also on his feet, blood oozing from several wounds on his face. He didn't look good, but Anderson could see that he was a long way from beaten. Despite the blood, Anderson wasn't sure who had gotten the better of that exchange. His ribs hurt like hell. The next time Davis moved in he was moving a lot slower than he had been before. Anderson was able to land blows at will. After taking a lot of punishment, Davis broke off the attack.

"What's the matter? Anderson asked. "Too much for you?"

Davis produced a very large steetle.

Uh-oh, Anderson thought. "Come on Luke, I thought you were better than that. What kind of a coward pulls a knife on an unarmed man?"

Rather than respond Davis rushed in. Anderson grabbed Davis' knife arm, but Davis just kept coming. Anderson stood his ground and lowered his head. Davis' face slammed into the top of Anderson's head and he lost his footing. Anderson transferred the momentum of Davis' fall into Davis' arm and heard it snap. He then kicked Davis in the ribs twice. Both times he heard the sound of breaking bones. He let go of Davis' arm, the knife went spinning away and Davis lay on the floor unmoving; the fight was over.

Anderson took a deep breath, there wasn't really time to rest. He hadn't had time to rest since being discharged from the Coalition Marines. He'd only barely managed to survive the trip that took him to Valmont and Jack McCormick. Then he and Jack had had to attack the Network's installation to stop Chen's efforts to kill him. Now he'd assembled a Merc unit and was on his way to Vallyho to

## Absolute Magnitude

deal with Chen. He let his mind slip back to the days following the assault on the Network's installation.

Shea, Anderson's computer specialist, had tracked the *Avenger* to Vallyho. It was stationed there for an extended stay. That was interesting. Vallyho was one of the Coalition's major shipyards. It produced something like a third of all Coalition war vessels. It was also close to the Coalition's border with Earth. If Vallyho went with Earth, the Coalition's position might not be insurmountable. Earth might even be able to force a costly stand off, if nothing else.

Now all that Anderson had to do was find employment for his fledgling unit on Vallyho. That turned out to be a lot easier than he had anticipated. It took almost no time for Shea to find someone with enough money who was interested in having a unit of mercenaries on Vallyho. Anderson had Shea set up a meeting with the prospective client.

Two days later the meeting took place. In attendance were Anderson, McCormick, Shea and their prospective employer Arnold Conner. Anderson was impressed with the man. Arnold Conner struck him as intelligent and well informed. He wasted no time in getting right to the point. "Gentlemen, my brother is a member of the shipbuilder's union on Vallyho. Actually, he is a member of the committee negotiating a new contract for the union. If the talks break down, he could be in danger. I've tried to make him understand the gravity of his position. Unfortunately, he won't believe anything that I tell him. I think he's under the impression that I'm paranoid. I've explained to him that war between the Coalition and Earth is on the horizon. He won't listen."

"Where do we come in?" Anderson asked.

"I want you and your unit to protect him from the Coalition. It's quite possible that you won't have to do anything. There's always a chance that the union and the Coalition will reach an agreement. But if war breaks out before that happens, I want my brother off that planet. Should that fail, I want to make sure that he doesn't fall into Coalition hands."

"So, you want to hire us as bodyguards?"

"Yes."

"That's simple enough."

"Well, not exactly. Jim won't accept help of any kind from me."

"Why not?"

"He wants to make it on his own. Our father was Reginald Conner, the shipping magnate. Jim's share of the inheritance is something like 50,000,000,000 units. He won't touch it. He chucked everything, moved to Vallyho, and took a job as a welder. Can you believe that? He graduated from the finest colleges in the galaxy and he took a job as a welder."

"Mr. Conner," Anderson said, "how are we supposed to guard him without his knowing it?"

"I can get all of you jobs in the shipping yard."

Anderson looked to McCormick. "Ever worked in a shipping yard?"

"Nope, but I'm always looking for new career opportunities."

"You can find work in the ship yard for one hundred men?"

"That'll be the easiest part. I can get you jobs and get you there. The rest is up to you."

"Mister Conner, would you be so kind as to wait in the reception area while we make a decision?" Conner left the room and Anderson turned to McCormick. "The job isn't quite as simple as Conner is making it out to be."

"Oh?"

"No," Shea chimed in. "Jim Conner isn't just a high-ranking member of the Union there. He's also involved, peripherally, with a secession movement. In fact, the Coalition has his name on a list of people to be rounded up if war with Earth breaks out."

"But he isn't a ringleader?"

"Not at the moment," Anderson said, "but if things heat up, and I'm sure they will, that could change. Conner is well liked and trusted by both the Union and the Movement. That coupled with his family background make him very attractive to anyone looking for legitimacy."

"So he could turn out to be a major player?"

"Exactly, and if I'm right, he'll need our kind of support. The messiest part of any revolution is trying to figure out who's in charge when it's all over. I want to make sure I have a say in who'll run things once we oust the Coalition."

"You don't plan small, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, this sounds like it's our ticket, but how do we tell the everyone that they'll be working in a shipping yard? I mean most of them are mercenaries because they didn't want to do this kind of work."

Shea laughed. "I suppose you start by telling them they'll be drawing two paychecks for a while."

McCormick laughed. "That will certainly help. We'll also have some logistical concerns to work out. If we're going to arrive on Vallyho as common laborers, we'll have to arrive on a transport ship without our weapons."

"I'll be going on to Vallyho ahead of the unit to take care of that," Shea said.

"At any rate, this job will get us on Vallyho without drawing any attention. And it won't take all of our energy to protect one man. That'll give us plenty of free time. I, for one, plan to visit an old commander of mine."

A week later, Anderson and his one hundred mercs boarded the *Caltra*, an old, decommissioned, Coalition troop carrier. Shea had told him there were already five hundred laborers on board. Valmont was the last stop before Vallyho. Some three hundred laborers boarded with Anderson's unit. The mercenaries mixed in with the Valmont natives. Everything looked very natural.

To meet the new arrivals as they boarded were five rough-looking workers. "Okay," the biggest one said. "I'm Luke Davis, and I'll be in charge of assigning work duty to you all while you're aboard the *Caltra*. Do what I say, when I say it, and don't ask questions. Things are simple here. Follow my orders and you'll be fine. Don't follow my orders and you'll wish you had."

Davis was at least six centimeters over two meters tall, he looked to weigh in at about one hundred sixty kilos. He was scarred about the face and knuckles. To Anderson, Davis looked to be nothing more than a well-muscled hooligan. Who had put this man in charge of people?

Anderson stayed quiet and went to his assigned bunk. It had been a long time since he'd bunked in a berthing compartment, and then there'd only been fifty people in the compartment. This compartment had originally been set up to house four hundred, but bunks had been added to crowd in even more. It was a far cry from Officer's Country, but if his unit could sleep here so could he. The bunk assignments had been completely random. Anderson found himself surrounded by people he didn't know. That was just as well;

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it reduced the chances of members of his unit accidentally calling him Major in front of strangers and thereby tipping his hand. The beds were bunked six beds high, his was on the fourth tier of a bunk.

"Welcome aboard, I'm Josh Kaczinski," the man in the bunk under him said, extending his hand.

Anderson took his hand and said, "I'm Tom Andrews." Anderson disliked using a false last name, but until he came to terms with Chen he didn't have a choice.

"Well, Tom, welcome to hell."

"Excuse me?"

"This is hell, our man Davis sees to that. Make one wrong move and he and his henchmen will be all over you. They've even killed a few workers."

"Why doesn't someone report this?"

Josh snorted. "To who? And besides, it wouldn't make any difference. The company doesn't care who's in charge down here in the berthing compartments. They just want things done. If you informed on Davis, you'd just be asking for trouble."

"How did a man like that get put in charge?"

"He beat the hell out of the last man that held his position."

"You mean the ship owners are letting this happen?"

"Of course they are. Thank God it's only two more weeks 'til we reach Vallyho. I'll be relieved when we pull in there."

Anderson stowed his gear in disbelief. The Coalition was supposed to keep this kind of thing from happening. This, more than anything that Shea or McCormick had told him, brought home to Anderson just how wrong he had been about the Coalition. Everything they had said was true. The Coalition didn't care. Money was everything, people didn't matter.

"Okay, you," a voice said. "You've had long enough to stow your gear. Get to work."

Anderson looked up just in time to see Davis's fist coming at him. As the fist connected with his face, Anderson rolled with it to the right and with his ears ringing came up in a fighter's stance.

"So you want a piece of ol' Luke, do ya?"

"No, sir," Anderson said lowering his hands. "I didn't realize you were talking to me. I don't want any trouble, I'll just run along and do my work."

"Very smart of you. You just might do okay here. Now get to work."

Anderson followed Josh out of the berthing compartment. He would have liked nothing better than to have gotten a piece of "ol' Luke," but he wouldn't do that right away. It was better to wait a few days and find out who Luke's friends were. He wasn't about to beat Luke in a fair fight only to have his throat slit at night by one of Luke's men. No, he'd take his time and do it right.

The work day went slowly, as a marine officer, Anderson had had little experience with clean up and maintenance. It seemed like a year before lunch was called. He went thankfully to the mess, got his meal, and took a seat. McCormick sat next to him at one of the mess's long tables.

"I'm surprised you didn't take that candy-ass apart, back there."

Anderson chuckled. "It wasn't easy stopping myself. But if I had, I'd be in charge here now."

"That's the way it works?"

"Yeah."

"I was wondering how an ass like Davis got to be in charge of a deck division."

"By being bigger and stronger than anyone else. I'll take him out. I just want to make sure I know who his friends are first."

"Makes sense to me. I'll have some of our people check into it. But if he hits you again, I'm not sure they'll put up with it."

"If he hits me again, I'll put him down hard and fast."

"Sounds good to me. God this food is awful."

"Kind of makes you homesick for Officer's Country, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. Just two weeks of this. We'll make it."

Anderson got through the rest of the day by thinking of things other than the task at hand. His thoughts turned to his time with the Coalition, and of how things might go once he reached Vallyho. He had a lot to make up for. A lifetime of mistakes, planets full of broken promises and crushed dreams. It didn't matter that he hadn't realized what was happening at the time. Sins, even sins of ignorance, had to be atoned for. Maybe someday he'd be able to live with himself again. Maybe.

At the end of the day, a very tired Anderson made his way to the berthing compartment.

"You look tired, Tom," Josh said.

"I'm not used to this kind of work. I'll get over it fast enough."

"Good, I know where there's a card game tonight, if you're interested."

Anderson almost said no out of reflex. He didn't gamble, but a card game would be a good place to find out all that he could about Luke. If he lost enough units, everyone else would be in a good mood. "Sure, but I've got to warn you I'm not much of a card player."

Josh smiled. "All the better."

"You wouldn't take advantage of a guy like me, would you?" Anderson asked in jest.

"Not unless we were playing poker."

"So what are we playing?"

"Poker."

Anderson laughed and followed Josh to the game. Once there, Josh introduced Anderson to the other three players Nick, Arlene, and Ray. Then they sat down and started playing. Anderson won the first hand.

"Hey, Josh, did you bring a ringer to the game?" Arlene asked with a smile on her face.

"Hell no, Tom told me he wasn't much of a card player."

Anderson managed to lose the next three hands to good effect, staying in for the final showdown on two of the them.

"So, Tom, what do you think of our lovely ship?" Nick asked.

"I'm not sure what to think. I hardly expected to meet someone like Davis here."

"I thought you were going to mix it up with him. It's a good thing you didn't, he's an animal. You'd do best to stay clear of him."

"I can agree with that," Anderson said raising the stakes. Everyone but Arlene folded; her three sixes beat his two pair. "Can't seem to get a break tonight."

"Don't worry about it," Arlene said, "it's not like you were going to spend it on-board the ship."

"Just the same..."

"Tom, you came up pretty fast from that shot Davis gave you, were you ever in the military?" Ray asked.

"No."

"Funny, I thought that I recognized you. I spent two years on the *Traveler*. You look like one of my old shipmates."

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Anderson stiffened. He'd been the exec on the *Traveler* for three years. What was Ray trying to say? I recognize you, it's okay, or, I recognize you, what's it worth to you for me to keep it quiet? Anderson was going to have to find out. "I don't know about that. So what is an ex-navy man doing on a ship like this?"

"Ex-navy my ass," Ray snorted. "I was a Coalition Marine. Even served with Anderson The Enforcer, though, he wasn't called The Enforcer in those days. In those days he was just an exec."

"I'm impressed, Anderson The Enforcer."

"He was one hell of an officer. He would've had Davis for lunch."

"Can we play cards, guys?" Arlene asked.

"Fine by me," Anderson said.

After another half hour or so Anderson feigned fatigue and begged out of the game. Ray dropped out also and followed. Anderson waited until he was out of sight of the other card players and then he turned to Ray.

"So you know who I am. What do you want?"

"I'm not looking for anything. I don't know if you remember me, but I'm Ray Matuszko."

"I'm afraid I don't. It's been a long time since the *Traveler*."

"Well, you see, sir, when I was discharged from the corps, my CO put some rather uncomplimentary things in my file, and as a result I can't find any military work. I've had to take whatever work I can find. Mining here, longshoring there, I've been in cold storage twice since my discharge; you just can't imagine what that was like. Soldiering is the only thing I've ever known. I was a damn good master sergeant and I thought you might remember me. And perhaps you might even be heading somewhere to start up a unit or something and I thought that maybe, just maybe you could use a good non-com."

"So, if I give you a job, you'll keep quiet."

Anderson saw the pain in Ray's eyes. "No, sir, that isn't what this is about. One of Luke's men noticed that you had some support among the new members of the crew and he's planning to make an example of you tonight. I thought you should know that. I'm sorry to have bothered you. You don't have anything to worry about from me." With that Ray turned to leave.

Anderson realized that he wasn't all that different from the master sergeant. A bad word on his record and an unjust discharge. They're only difference was that Anderson had been a high-profile officer and he had enough of a reputation to start up his own unit. Anderson had seen the hollowness in Ray's eyes, the hunger for the self-respect that the Coalition had stripped him of. All Anderson had to do to give Ray back his self-respect was sign him up. A soldier was a soldier and without an army he was nothing. "Master Sergeant, I can always use a good experienced non-com. Captain McCormick will be over to debrief you, and welcome to the unit."

Ray turned back to Anderson, his eyes misted over. "Thank you, sir, you won't regret this."

Looking directly into Ray's tear-filled eyes, Anderson was certain of that.

An hour later McCormick reported to Anderson. "Alright, Tom, this is how it shapes up. It looks like Davis and a few of his goons are planning to roust you from your bed tonight. They plan to rough you up enough to make sure that Davis doesn't have a problem with you on his own. Luke's a bad ass; but you moved quickly enough this morning to give him some pause. While all of this is going on, about twenty of his people will be on the lookout for anyone who

seems to support you. They have no idea that we outnumber them five to one. How do you want to handle this?"

"You got all this from Ray?"

"Yeah, he bunks near one of Davis' flunkies. Davis has them spread through out the hold so that he can keep tabs on everything that's going on. Fortunately for us, it works the opposite way too."

"What kind of feeling did you get from Ray?"

"I think you made the right choice. He seems solid."

"Okay, then, have we identified all of Davis' henchmen?"

"Every one of them. They're a worthless bunch of shits."

"Make sure that all of his people are accounted for when he comes for me I want it to be him against me."

"Are you sure, Tom? I know you can handle him, one on one, but a brawl is always an uncertain thing."

"I don't want to blow our cover before we even reach the planet. That's how things are done on this ship. The biggest, baddest guy calls the shots. I can't stand up and say, I'm Tom Anderson, and I'm in charge because I have the support of my outfit. I have to earn it, and I do that by kicking the shit out of Davis. Like it or not that's how things are done here."

"All right. We'll work something out so that it doesn't look too much like a set-up."

Tom shook his head. "So how long has a fair fight been called a set-up?"

"Davis wouldn't fight you fair otherwise."

Anderson pulled himself from his introspection and looked for McCormick. Now that the fight was over they'd have to get to work on a new duty roster and get this deck straightened out.

McCormick approached Anderson. "Got a message from Shea."

"We'll talk about it in my new quarters," Anderson said heading for what had been Davis' private quarters. Once there he asked, "How are things on Vallyho?"

"Everything looks fine for us, but the political situation is deteriorating faster than we had anticipated."

Anderson nodded. "Any kind of a timeline?"

"No, but Shea thinks the Coalition might impose martial law within the month."

"Damn, that won't make our lives any easier."

"No, that it won't. Worse yet, Shea says that the opposition party is conducting almost all of their communication online."

"Are they out of their minds?"

"Frankly, I don't think they have a clue what they're dealing with. Vallyho has been treated rather well by the Coalition. They've never seen what the Coalition leaves behind after a confrontation. If they did, they wouldn't be so open about their unhappiness with the Coalition."

"Well, we have to deal with the situation as is. Shea managed to get the weapons in undetected?"

"Yeah, he said it was a piece of cake. No one even suspects that we're entering the picture."

"Good, has the *Avenger* received any added support?"

"No, they're not expecting any real resistance. The separatist movement on Vallyho is a joke compared to what they're used to."

"Alright, there's nothing more we can do until we get there. In the meantime I've got to get these duty rosters working. We have no idea of just how badly Davis managed things here."

## Behavior Unbecoming an Officer

By the time *the Caltro* docked on Vallyho, Anderson was more than happy to surrender his supervisory duties. He didn't mind being a commanding officer, but a foreman was something else entirely. He disembarked from the ship alone. Since Arnold Conner had managed to pull some strings and get Anderson assigned to Jim Conner, he was going to have to let Shea and McCormick see to the men. He was simply in too high-profile a position to risk bringing attention to himself.

There was a lot of activity going on in the docking bays. This was one of the busiest ports Anderson had ever seen. Work of all descriptions was in progress here. He waited in the docking bay for close to an hour before Conner showed up. Conner looked remarkably like his older brother. "You Andrews?"

"Yes, and you must be Jim Conner," Anderson said putting out his hand.

"That would be me," Conner said ignoring his hand. "Look, this is nothing personal, but I'm not going to get real chummy with you. I didn't want an assistant. Hell, I pulled every string that I could trying to get you reassigned. I couldn't even manage to get you housed in separate quarters. I don't know what's going on here, but I'm not pleased by it."

"Well, I can't say that I'm glad to hear that."

"Come on," Conner said turning and starting on his way. Anderson followed. "According to your records you're a novice welder's apprentice."

"Yes, sir."

"What the hell makes someone your age want to learn how to weld?"

"I needed employment. Jobs are hard to come by on Valmont; and the recruiter told me I could find work on Vallyho if I'd be willing to learn how to weld."

"Just my luck."

"Look, Mr. Conner--"

"Jim."

"Look, Jim, I can understand your being upset by the situation, but all I want is a chance to put my past behind me and start a new life here. I certainly don't want to disrupt your life."

Conner shook his head. "You're right, of all the people I should blame for this you're probably the least responsible."

"I'd like to make the best of this."

"You got family on Valmont?"

"No, I've traveled a lot, made some dumb mistakes, and now I'm hoping to start with a clean slate here."

"This is a good place for that. What did you do before you decided to become a welder?"

Anderson thought over his reply for a moment. He didn't want to lay it on too thick. "I worked in big business. I specialized in hostile take overs." That was close to the truth. "But I woke up one day and I couldn't do it any more. I couldn't force myself to go out there and crush any more dreams. Have you ever woken up and realized that all the money in the world doesn't mean a damn thing?"

Conner studied Anderson for a moment. "Yeah, I've been there. It's not a nice place."

In the next two weeks Anderson got to know Conner very well. His respect for the man grew with each passing day. He had integrity, decency, and a sense of honor. This was the kind of man who should be in charge of worlds. Only Jim Conner didn't really want that kind of responsibility. He'd been forced onto the political scene by the crush of events.

Anderson heard Conner turn on the tri-dee. "Holy shit, Tom, check this out."

Anderson came out of his room and into living room. He wasn't nearly as surprised by what was on the tri-dee as Conner had been. He'd had a hand in creating this news.

"Can you believe this, some idiot got a bomb on board the *Avenger*. No one was hurt, but the ship will be in dry dock for at least two weeks. This is not good. We're already having enough problems with the Coalition. We didn't need this."

Anderson paid close attention to the report. He was glad that no one had been injured, he had a lot of friends on board the *Avenger*. If the news reporter could be trusted, the *Avenger* had sustained major damage to its faster-than-light drive and its hull had been breached. The *Avenger* was still space worthy, but repairs would be much quicker in dock. Anderson had had to have the bomb placed on the ship to get it in dock. Otherwise, he'd never be able to take over the ship when it came time. He was still going to have to worry about the *Avenger's* escort. Three cruiser and five destroyers were still a formidable challenge even to a battleship.

"We interrupt this regular news cast for some fast breaking news," a terse voice said, as the picture switched from shots of the *Avenger* to an anchorman sitting behind a desk. "In an unexpected move the Earth Federation has declared war on the Coalition. Immediately following this declaration twenty seven planets declared their independence from the Coalition. The Earth Federation has officially recognized each planet's independence and has invited them to join the Earth Federation as equal partners. Vallyho was among the planets to declare its independence. The Coalition forces on Vallyho have declared martial law. It is my unfortunate duty to inform you that Vallyho is now at war with the Coalition."

Conner switched off the Tri-dee. "God damn it, that was fast. I didn't even hear about it."

Anderson nodded. He hadn't expected things to move this quickly either. If everything was going as planned McCormick would now be assaulting the *Avenger* and someone would be coming out to escort Conner to safety. Once that happened, Anderson would take over command of the assault.

Anderson moved quickly into his room to get his assault rifle and armor. Just as he entered his room the front door came crashing in. "Nobody move. Coalition Special Police, everyone down."

Anderson grabbed his assault rifle and opened fire through his bedroom door. Both of the police coming through the front door went down. Anderson moved quickly, but cautiously, into the living room. There had only been two officers. That made sense. Coalition forces would be spread as thinly as possible, they had a lot of people to round up. Jim Conner was looking at Tom with complete shock.

"You're brother sends his regards."

"My brother."

"He hired me to keep you safe and get you off-world."

"You son-of-a-bitch, you mother-fucking-son-of-a-bitch."

Anderson took a deep breath. "Look we don't have a lot of time. Some of my people will be arriving shortly. We have to get you to a safe place."

"Who the hell are you?"

"My real name is Tom Anderson."

"You're the fucking Enforcer."

"Not any more. I'm not with the Coalition these days. One of my aims is to make sure Vallyho isn't ravaged by the Coalition."

## Absolute Magnitude

"And to think I was beginning to like you."

"Jim, look, this is my situation. I was discharged from the Coalition several months ago. When I was discharged I found out that things weren't the way I thought they were. I came here to Vallyho because of its strategic importance. If I can keep the Coalition from getting its hands on Vallyho the Earth Federation might have a tenable position. I'm on *your* side."

"If you're working for my brother you're not on my side."

"I promised your brother I'd keep you safe. He wants you off-planet, but I don't see that as a viable alternative at this moment."

"So what the hell are you going to do? Vallyho doesn't have a military."

"I've got a small force on the planet."

"You gonna' be dictator, Tom?"

"No, I'm going to be a liberator. I'll handle the armed forces, but I'm not the least bit interested in ruling anything."

"Yeah right."

"Look, this is essentially a revolution. By now the Coalition has gathered up most of Vallyho's government. Someone has to be in charge. I think that someone should be you."

"What?"

"Without my forces the Coalition takes over in a matter of hours. As is, Vallyho's government's going to be in complete chaos for several days. You're already a popular choice for president. If you show some willpower and reserve you'll be seen as Vallyho's savior. Jim, this is for real. We're talking about the future of the planet you've made your home."

"What's in this for you?"

"Redemption. I've made a lot of mistakes. If I can save this world from the Coalition I'll have taken a major step towards making up for those mistakes."

"I'm not willing to be your puppet."

"Nor am I asking you to."

"Damn it, I've never wanted this kind of responsibility. Why does it always come to this?"

"Because you're the kind of man that people turn to at times like these."

Two flitters landed outside of the house and several members of Anderson's unit came swarming out, ready for anything. Once they were certain that all was clear they entered the house through the splintered door and over the bodies of the fallen Coalition police.

"Master Sergeant Ray Matuszko reporting, sir," Ray said, snapping a salute.

"At ease Sergeant. Report."

"Currently: Captain McCormick is leading an assault on the *Avenger*. He has most of our unit and some four hundred partisans under his control at this moment. All is going according to plan."

"Good." Four hundred partisans, Shea had done his job well. "Jim, I need to know where you stand."

"I stand with Vallyho. If that means I have to take charge, then so be it."

"I'm glad to hear that. Once things settle down I don't think you'll regret your decision."

"I hope not."

"Master Sergeant, see to Mr. Conner's safety. I have to get to the port."

Anderson got into one of the flitter with half of his men and Conner got into the other looking scared and bewildered. Conner would be taken to a safe house where he would be able to

communicate with what was left of the Vallyho government. Shea had assured Anderson that anyone left after the initial sweep by the Coalition would happily appoint Conner president. Putting all that aside, Anderson and his men sped towards the space port. He had a planet to liberate.

Ten minutes later Anderson was at McCormick's side getting a full report. "Chen's forces still control about half of the ship. We think there might be some division among the marines. A large number of them are from planets that seceded along with Vallyho. Chen had an information blackout in place aboard the *Avenger*, but Shea made damn sure that the marines got the latest news. They're completely up on the situation, and apparently a good number of them feel more loyalty to their home worlds than they do to the Coalition."

"What's the status on the *Avenger's* escort?"

"The last report I heard said that they'd retreated out of the planet's weapons systems range of fire and were waiting to see how things would shake out here on the surface. They don't want to destroy any more of this planet than they have to. They've still got plans to use it. As far as I can tell they don't realize that it isn't just Vallyho natives behind this attack."

"How much force does the Coalition still have on the planet?"

"We've taken a good number of their police captive. But they did manage to pick up more of Vallyho's government than I would have liked. At the moment almost their entire force is holed up in their armory. We don't have the forces to lay siege to it, but we can keep them in there. So they're pretty much a nonfactor."

"Good. I think it's time we let the *Avenger* know who they're dealing with. Can you open up a line."

"It's open," McCormick said after a moment.

"*Avenger*, this is Major Tom Anderson, I am in charge of the Vallyho military forces. We would like to discuss terms for your surrender. Please respond."

A few moment went by and Beth McKenna's face appeared in the portable Tri-dee screen. "Major, is that really you?"

"Yes, Beth, it is."

"We'd heard you were dead."

"As you can see..."

"Then I'd like to discuss terms."

"Are you in control of the *Avenger* then?"

"No, sir, I'd like to discuss terms of surrender for the marines who are still loyal to the Coalition. Right now we're between a rock and a hard place. Chen is not offering us any support. He's told me that since half of the marines revolted he can't trust any of us. I'm not in a particularly tenable position. I'd rather surrender my unit than see it wiped out. The fighting is heavy right now and we're not doing well."

"The terms I can offer you are that you may surrender as prisoners of war. No one will be killed or tortured. You will all be afforded the dignity that any human deserves."

Beth took in a deep breath. "Thank you, Tom. Now in order for me to surrender we've got to get some sort of a cease fire."

"I'll get right on it."

"I've got the leader of the renegade force on the other channel," McCormick offered.

Lieutenant Olavegoya appeared on screen. "Major, may I say I'm delighted to find that you're still alive and I offer you the support of my unit."

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"Thank you, Lieutenant. I appreciate that. Captain McKenna has offered to surrender her forces to me. I need your people to cease firing and disembark from the ship."

"Major, we're not rebels. We've chosen to remain loyal to our home worlds."

"I understand that, Lieutenant. You'll be treated as part of our team. Right now I need a coordinated force in there. I'm sure you're quite loyal, but until you've had time to be assimilated into my force I'm better off with my own people in there."

"Then you're offering full membership to each and every one of us in the planetary forces?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, that will be offered to each individual member of your force."

Olavegoya didn't hesitate, he knew what Anderson's words were worth. "We'll cease firing immediately and begin our withdrawal from the ship forthwith."

Anderson looked to McCormick. "Get the unit ready to move into the portions of the ship we're not already in control of. I assume that the Navy personnel are still in control of the bridge areas."

"That would be a safe assumption. They've sealed off that section of the ship. My impression is that Chen still thinks that supporting forces will arrive soon. But if he's monitoring these exchanges, he should know better now."

"Major," Matheson's voice broke in. "The *Avenger* just tried to bring their engines on line."

"Damn," Anderson swore. "Chen was going to lift off with all of the marines in non pressurized sections of the ship."

"That would look to be the case."

"But half of the marines are still loyal to him."

"Obviously Chen doesn't care. It's a damn good thing we *fixed* the engines for him."

Twenty minutes later Anderson was aboard the *Avenger* and in control of all but the bridge. "Where's Shea?" Anderson asked.

"He's on his way with a bridge crew," an officer replied.

"Bridge crew?" Anderson asked of McCormick.

"We've been busy, Tom. Shea's found the makings of a bridge crew among the Valhalla loyalists. It won't be any where near as first class as we're used to, but we will be able to get this ship up into orbit to deal with the *Avenger*'s escort."

"What's the word on the escort?"

"No change at the moment, but Chen has put out a general SOS. Tom, he's scared shitless."

"Good," Anderson smiled.

Shea arrived with a large group of men. For the most part the bridge crew looked like a group of lawyers, doctors, and accountants. "How are things going?" Shea asked.

"We're in control of most of the ship," McCormick answered, "but we haven't been able to get access to the bridge yet."

"That's too bad. Having access to the actual bridge would make this easier, but I think I can wrest control of the ship from Chen through the computer systems."

"Get on that right away," Anderson said.

"Will do, sir," Shea said.

Anderson smiled. It still seemed a bit strange having a cyborg in the unit and it was downright funny the way Shea's voice sounded around the word sir. "Let's get the men into gear. We're not going to be able to pressurize this portion of the ship."

Thirty minutes later Shea had control of the ship. "I can't get them out of the bridge, sir. They've taken those controls out of the

system, but I have control over everything else. I've also isolated them from the system so that even if they have a cyborg they won't be able to duplicate what I've just done. I've got to tell you, these are some tricky computers. They were made with cyborgs in mind."

At this point nothing the Coalition had done surprised Anderson. "Good work, Shea. Now we need to get at the Navy forces still on board. Then we can take her up."

"Major," a terse voice said, "the *Avenger*'s escort is coming back in system. From the communications I've picked up, they know the situation and are planning to wreak as much havoc as they can on the planet. We don't have a chance against them if we stay in dock."

Anderson didn't like the idea of doing battle with the *Avenger* in its present shape and he especially didn't like the idea of going up with Coalition forces in control of any part of the ship. "Is the *Avenger* ready to be taken up?"

"Yes, Sir. The engines are back on line, and all weapons systems are fully operational."

Anderson nodded. This part of the operation was out of his hands. He watched as the bridge crew prepared for liftoff. Anderson felt the *Avenger* shimmy as it lifted off. It had never felt that way coming out of the docks before. Once this was over they would have to see to the repair of this ship.

The *Avenger* began firing on its former escort even before it cleared the planet's gravity well. The three cruisers and five destroyers also opened fire. This was going to be a slugfest. One of the destroyers was struck by a laser blast and exploded. The *Avenger* took some damage but continued on up. Two of the destroyers took direct hits and stopped firing. The battle lasted three minutes. One cruiser and two destroyers turned tail and ran. The *Avenger*, unable to keep up with them, let them go.

McCormick came over to Anderson smiling. "That's that. Valhalla's going to make it through this. There are two battleships scheduled to be finished this week. Once they're ready we can put them into orbit and get the *Avenger* back into the docks."

"The Coalition is going to come after this planet with everything they've got."

"You're right about that, Tom. But we'll be bringing a battleship on line every week. We should be able to hold our own long enough for Earth to get us some relief."

Anderson nodded. "That we should. Well, I guess it's time we go see an old commander of ours."

McCormick smiled. "I've been waiting for this."

Anderson's force moved into position around the perimeter of the bridge sections. Explosives were placed and the entrances were blown. Chen's men were prepared for this and opened fire even before the dust had settled. The Marines swapped fire with the Navy men for ten minutes before moving in. Anderson was gratified to find that the Navy men were dropping back. They just didn't have the fire power to keep up a real fire fight. In another ten minutes it was all over and Anderson's men were in control.

"Tom, I have Chen in custody," McCormick's voice said over Anderson's suit radio.

"Where are you, Jack?"

"In Chen's quarters."

"I'm on my way." The bridge section was repressurized before Anderson arrived at Chen's quarters and he took off his helmet, he wanted Chen to be able to see his face. Chen sat on his bunk looking thoroughly beaten. He looked up at Anderson as he entered the room. "You son-of-a-bitch, how did you do this to me. You're

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supposed to be dead."

"You know the old saying. If you want something done right...I didn't count on help from murderers."

Chen put his head into his hands. "So now what? Are you going to kill me?"

"No, Chen, I will *never* sink to that level. I'm placing you under arrest."

"By whose authority?"

"The Independent Government of Vallyho."

"What charge?" Chen demanded angrily.

Anderson smiled. "Behavior unbecoming an officer."



## SCAVENGER'S NEWSLETTER

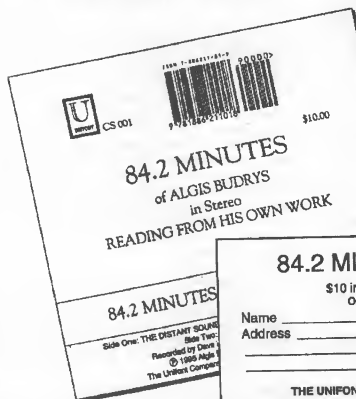
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One might have said, years ago, that Timothy Zahn was one of the most promising, up-and-coming writers of hard SF to enter the field in many years. But now it's more accurate to say he's up-and-arrived. He won a Hugo for "Cascade Point" in 1984. He has published, to date, nineteen books, including three *Star Wars* novels, which put him on the best-seller lists. This interview was recorded at a meeting of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society.

## Timothy Zahn: An Interview

by Darrell Schweitzer

**Absolute Magnitude:** Let's start with the beginning, neither the beginning of the universe nor your birth, but the beginning of your career. The first time I remember seeing your name in print, it was in the Elinor Mavor *Amazing* about 1981 or so. Is that the beginning?

**Timothy Zahn:** I started writing in 1975 as a hobby, for something to do during the times when I was stuck on the doctoral thesis project I was working on. I had some idea at that point about writing, perhaps taking a year off after I had my doctorate, writing full-time to see if I could make a go of it. The first story I sold was in December 1979. I still have the letter from Stan Schmidt at *Analog*: "Dear Tim, The check probably won't make it in time for your Christmas shopping, but I'd like you to know that I am buying 'Ernie.' " "Ernie" was the name of the story. It appeared in the September 1979 issue. I got the letter in late 1978. This was preliminary of course to the whole idea of taking time off to write. Then in July of 1979, before the first story was published, my advisor died of a heart attack. The project hadn't been going anywhere. None of the other departments were interested in picking it up, and they told me, "Well, if you work eight to ten hours a day, six days a week, for the next two years, you can probably pick up your doctorate for something else."

I had already had six years in grad school. I had had a lot more fun writing than doing physics, so I decided that this sounded like the time to take that plunge, so on January 2, 1980, I started writing full time. So far, it seems to be working.

**AM:** Did you actually make a *living* right away? There's an example I always give my writing students, to discourage them from quitting their day jobs. Suppose you are more successful than most would-be writers ever get. In your first year you sell six, 5000-word stories to *Analog*. That's about \$300 apiece, or, \$1500. Then, even more successfully, you sell your first novel to a paperback house, for an ordinary first-novel advance of, say, \$4000. You see where this is going? So, how did you overcome the cold equations of the checkbook.

**TZ:** A couple different ways. First of all, I got married in August of 1979. A month before I had sold a second story, and a few months after that my in-laws were delighted to discover that I was quitting a planned career in physics and was writing science fiction. But we thought this out carefully. My wife had a job which was not terrific from her point of view, but it was something which could bring in a bit of money. We had a certain amount of savings. We had an incredibly cheap place to live, because there was this little old lady in town who had an apartment building she liked to rent out cheaply to students and other ne'er-do-wells. So we were living in an apartment for \$100 a month, which was dirt-cheap even back in the '80s. You're right. I did not expect to make much money that first year. I

set a goal of \$1000.00. If I couldn't clear \$1000.00 that first year, then this was a failure and I had better find some honest work someplace. As a matter of fact, by mid-September I had sold \$356.00 worth. I started to read the want ads in the paper. But by that time the time-lag kicked in. I had been writing stories continuously through the first part of the year. The time-lag between when you send it out and when somebody buys it caught up with me. I ended the year with just a little over \$2000.00. So I took this to be a good omen and kept at it. Actually, we started making what we would consider a living wage somewhere around 1984 or 1985.

**AM:** Surely, the money is not enough to motivate one to become a writer. Do you think that if you hadn't made that \$1000.00, you would have gotten a job and kept on writing anyway?

**TZ:** I would have tried to keep writing anyway. The problem is, as I found out, that one semester when I tried working on a new project and writing at the same time, I was not equipped to handle both. Possibly it was because I was starting something brand-new and re-learning all the physics I had forgotten while becoming an authority on Bessel functions. The fact was that was just too draining for me to have much luck. That was what led me to quit physics. I was not going to be able to do both, and writing was much more interesting. I would have tried to do both, but it would not have been easy and it would have become more work than fun.

**AM:** Throughout your education you were presumably studying science, and you were presumably reading science fiction. Did you also make any attempt to deliberately acquire a broader literary background as a preparation for writing?

**TZ:** Not really. In grad school I didn't have much time for anything except the physics and math courses. But in college, I did try to take what I would call a "comic relief course" once per term, something that was not physics and not math. Usually I would take these courses pass/fail so I didn't have to work too hard. It was something to rouse me out of a rut. I had no intention of using it for writing. I was thinking about broadening my perspective. I had a couple courses in psychology, three or four astronomy courses, a folklore class, an ancient history class that started with Sumeria and continued for a couple thousand years B.C. All sorts of things. A body-language course was fascinating. So I did pick up a little bit of roundness in college, again with no real intent of using it, but I didn't have very much, and it is handy to have that background.

**AM:** I am reminded of a remark Gardner Dozois made once, to the effect that as long as you don't snore too loudly, anything you do can be called research. The great advantage the writer has is that any

## Timothy Zahn: An Interview

background you have, in whatever subject, you can use. You're not wasting anything you do.

**TZ:** People are continually asking me in letters, "Where do you get your ideas?" The simple answer is, everywhere. They're all around. They're floating through the air. You grab them. You find two pieces that fit beautifully together from very disparate sources. You can find a character by sitting in a restaurant people-watching. You're right. Everything is, on some level, research. You just have to learn to see what's there and look at everything with a "what if?" or "how can I use this?" attitude.

**AM:** Possibly the advantage you gained by going into writing through physics is that otherwise, had you merely started out to be a writer at the age of twenty, with no experience in anything, you might not have had anything to write about. Certainly it helps in science fiction to know some real science.

**TZ:** There is a certain amount of advantage in knowing science. I had been out of science long enough to fall behind. In my doctorate project I was doing mathematical calculations—I wasn't really on the cutting edge of physics anyway. One advantage of having been in science was that I knew how to fake it better. I know the language. I know how inventions are named, how things are used. I have a better idea of, when I am making up my own science and technology, how the stuff is used. About the only thing I can remember specifically using from my science background was the conformal mapping and transforms I used in "Cascade Point." That was the only place I ever used those two.

**AM:** In "Cascade Point" you've used the patter of science to make convincing what are really two quite familiar science-fictional ideas, that travel through hyperspace is psychologically difficult, and that such travel intersects with alternate universes. What's new is the suggestion that this be used as a kind of therapy. So, there must be a method here. Do you deliberately go looking for weird and mismatching elements from completely different sciences, to achieve such juxtapositions?

**TZ:** Sometimes I do. I've got a basic story in mind, and I come up with the suggestion, "Hey, wouldn't it be interesting if this weird thing were put into it?" Sometimes the pieces just fall that way by themselves. "Deadmen's Switch" is a good example of that. I was driving down Interstate 24 on the way to the Atlanta Worldcon, when it was pretty well dead along Interstate 24, and it occurred to me, "How about something where you have to have at the controls of your starship, someone who is freshly dead in order for the ship to work?" A strange idea, weird, something I can only attribute to the hour and Interstate 24, but it started from there. It was one of the weird ideas that popped into my mind. Then I had to hammer a reasonable scenario around it to make it seem plausible.

**AM:** Do you ever start at some point other than just the idea?

**TZ:** Sometimes I start with the characters. Generally, when I'm writing, the plot and character both are leapfrogging each other. As I'm outlining a new book, I generally have certain story ideas, which then require certain people to fill niches in that plot. But then they will behave in a certain way which will have influence on what the plot does. So it's a corbined process most of the time. But I've got a

couple of characters in mind for whom I'm dying to find a story. I haven't quite got a plot yet. And sometimes the character just appears as I am working on the outline. But most of the time it is the storyline, the plot, that I come up with first, and it is the characters who are added in, rather than the other way around.

**AM:** I think you may be living proof of the existence of *content* in fiction. This is an old critical conundrum. Samuel R. Delany once wrote an article in which he, quite convincingly and at length, argued that there was no such thing as "content," and that the style of the story makes up our total experience of reading it. But, I suspect, your stories are popular because the readers want to read about the *things* you are writing about. If you wrote cute bunny rabbit stories in the same style as your SF, I doubt they would have much appeal.

**TZ:** I think what you're talking about is what are called "mood pieces" or "slice of life" type things. I don't have the talent for doing that. I don't even know that I would want to try, because I don't generally write that type of story. Nothing much happens, but the feeling of the story is what counts. Some of these are good, but mostly I have not been interested in them. Therefore I would not write them well.

**AM:** What I mean specifically is that if the public wants to read about political matters in outer space, that will make *The Mote in God's Eye* sell. If a writer addresses the subject matter the public wants in an intelligent way, this will make for a successful book; whereas a similarly intelligent and capable treatment of a subject matter the public doesn't want to read about will only sell a dozen copies.

**TZ:** I am not sure you can really split them off. Really good stories can come from very dry, uninteresting matter. I can have as much trouble with a brilliantly written *nothing*. It seems to me that you really need both, the science and the fiction.

**AM:** What do you want to see in a science fiction story?

**TZ:** What I try to put in are, first of all, characters that the reader will care about. Generally my protagonists are people I would like to have as friends. You need an interesting story. You need a conflict that is serious, that is not just knocking over straw men, something that is going to have repercussions for a lot of people, if not for the whole universe, depending on what your protagonist accomplishes or fails to accomplish. As a sub-setting of that, a certain amount of humor in the characters, a certain amount of loyalty, a competence at what they do, a willingness to do what needs to be done even if they don't particularly like it. And I also like to put in enough plot twists that it's not obvious on page 4 what is going to happen all the way through the story.

**AM:** That should be particularly true for novels, where there have to be sufficient complications to carry through to book-length. You seem to have graduated quickly into novel-writing, after beginning with short stories.

**TZ:** Every story has, I think, its own natural length. I started out doing short fiction partly because I didn't have a handle on the novel-length form yet, and partly because I was trying to get that thousand bucks in the first year and I needed to get some sales in. One of the things I found, and one of the reasons I recommend short fiction to beginning

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authors, is that, at least the way I write novels, a book-length work has a series of small climaxes building up toward the final climax. Each of these little humps seems to be about short-story or novelette length. So if you can get the pacing right for a short story or novelette, at least for me, it is easier to get the pacing right for a longer work of fiction. Mostly I do novels because I started having ideas which are novel length. I still do some occasional short fiction. I am a firm believer in the concept that if you try to stretch a short story out to novel length, it will look stretched, just as badly as if you try to trim a novel-length idea into a short story. In fact in the novel I just mentioned, *Deadman Switch*, when I first proposed it to my agent, I was thinking of this being a mystery story of novella length, and when I got the description of what would happen, he said, "Do you really think this is a novella-length story?" And it turned out that by the time I had actually written it, by gosh, it was a novel.

**AM:** Do you outline first and block everything out before writing any of the actual narrative, or do you just plunge into it?

**TZ:** I generally write somewhere between a ten and twenty page outline before I do a novel. Part of the reason for doing this is so that I have a more firm idea in my mind of what is going to happen, where the characters come in and where the plot-twists come in. This is partly for me and partly for my editor, so that if there is something he really doesn't like, we can talk about it and work something through before I have gone through all the trouble of actually writing the thing out. So, I generally start with an outline, but that does not mean what's in the outline actually comes out in the novel. Often I will be four pages into the outline and get some nifty idea and branch off a little bit. Sometimes I have an idea that occurs to me as I am writing, which takes me seventy degrees off where I had originally planned. That's often the case. New characters crop up, or a minor character suddenly takes on more than a walk-on role. So I know where I am planning to go and what will occur at the resolution. How I will get there sometimes varies slightly, or wildly, from the original outline. The theory is that, once I am into the book, any change that I make will make it better.

**AM:** There are lots of writers who don't like to show a story to anybody until it is done, and certainly don't want other people's hands in while it is still in the formative stages. How do you feel about this?

**TZ:** I don't show it to anyone until it is done. But the purpose of the outline is so that the editor can say, "This whole concept doesn't work. We don't want this one." This is useful before I get started on something which I might have trouble selling or which will have to be massively rewritten. I don't like to show a work in progress to people. I take criticism of the final manuscript much better than I used to. It's a little bit difficult. In the last few years my reaction has changed from a "How dare you criticize my baby?" type of feeling to, "Damn it. You're right. Why didn't I get it right the first time?" That's an improvement.

**AM:** When you wrote your *Star Wars* novels, did you have a lot of interference from studio executives who wanted to dictate the content? I gather this is a real problem with *Star Trek*, for example. What were your experiences?

**TZ:** Not as much as it looked like I was going to have at the beginning. The story, as I understand it, was that back in 1988, Lou Aronica, who was then in charge of Bantam Spectra, wrote a letter to Lucasfilm saying that if Lucas wasn't doing anything with *Star Wars* these days, perhaps Bantam could do a three-book continuation. A year later Lucasfilm wrote back and said, "The idea sounds good. Find us an author. Let's talk contract." So they submitted a short list of proposed authors to Lucasfilm. They checked off the first name on the list, which was mine. I got a call from my agent at four o'clock on a Monday afternoon, saying we had a very interesting offer. When I actually started writing, I first had to submit an outline to Bantam, and they sent it on to Lucasfilm. At Lucasfilm, I didn't talk to executives so much. There was one woman who handled the liaison job for these books with Bantam. So these things were going through her. Occasionally they'd send a question up to George which she didn't feel qualified to answer. But mostly she was the one riding herd on the novels. She is still the one doing the novels that are coming out now. At the very beginning there was a certain amount of feeling that they were going to try to micro-manage me, little things here and there, and at a big meeting of all the editors of the comic books, Bantam, Lucasfilm people—none of the authors were invited by the way. There was a feeling that the director tells the writer what to do, which is not how it is done in books. But after a first flurry of stuff, they left me largely alone. The first manuscript came back from Lucasfilm with five pages, single-spaced, of changes, various things they wanted. By the time the third book came back, my editor was able to read to me over the phone the entirety of their comments. So somewhere between the beginning and the end they realized that I knew what I was doing and they could trust me. I heard a lot of the horror stories from the *Star Trek* people, but I really didn't have that kind of problem with Lucasfilm. I did worry about it at times, but generally this worry evaporated.

**AM:** When you write something based on a film: series like that, isn't there quite a temptation to try to bring it up to speed with real science fiction? Like eliminating the loud bangs in space, and maybe the stormtroopers can hit the broad side of a barn.

**TZ:** Gee, I thought I did add science fiction to it. Actually that's one of the comments I got from the Science Fiction Hook Club. Word came back, almost grudgingly when they read the first book, "Well, this is real science fiction." When you do a project like this, you have to remember that you are trying to capture a tone, a feeling of something. I had a concept of what *Star Wars* was. It was the good against evil. It was the camaraderie. It was the sense of we are fighting this evil empire that is seriously endangering everyone and we are all good guys and we will win in the end. So I tried to capture that feeling. I don't think I ever had any explosions going "Boom!" in space. I ignored the sound-track entirely. Other than that I tried to do the more science-fiction type explanations for things that Lucas has neglected to mention in the movies themselves. That was kind of fun, trying to paper over things that might otherwise appear to be errors. But generally I had no difficulty combining my idea of science fiction—by which I mean the internal consistency of whatever I am working with—with *Star Wars*. I think that *Star Wars* has, in many ways, a very internally consistent universe, as well as a vast canvas on which to slap some paint. So I had no problem with that. I probably would have trouble if I was asked to do a *Star Trek* novel.

## Timothy Zahn: An Interview

**AM:** There would be, for openers, the truly remarkable *Star Trek* physics to contend with. As soon as engines are turned off, spaceships start spiraling down to planets. "Dead stop" in space is a meaningful concept. . . .

**TZ:** There are other things I have problems with. I am willing to give them more on those than on some of the other things.

**AM:** Didn't the *Star Wars* trilogy gain you a much vaster readership than you had previously?

**TZ:** Something on the order of a factor of ten, maybe twenty.

**AM:** Did they cross over and read your other books?

**TZ:** That's what we're all going to find out with *Conquerors' Pride*. This is why it's important to my career, as well as to my self-esteem, to see how this book does, because this is the first non-*Star Wars* book I have done after three *Star Wars* novels. I don't know how many copies of my previous books were bought by *Star Wars* readers. I don't know how well Baen distributed them or reprinted them. So we're about to find out how much of the *Star Wars* audience is only reading *Star Wars* and how much will cross over into *Conquerors' Pride*.

**AM:** Can you tell from your fan mail?

**TZ:** Not really. A fair number are saying, "I've never heard of you before but I'll read your books from now on." What I found most amazing and gratifying about my fan mail is that almost half of the letters are coming from twelve-to-eighteen-year-olds. I think this is a triumph to be able to reach young people who, the common wisdom has it, do not read. I don't care if they're reading *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. They're reading. I feel I have done something useful if I turn even a half a dozen kids on to reading.

**AM:** So, what is this new novel about?

**TZ:** It's first of a trilogy. It's the story of the first contact and war between the Human Commonwealth, various and sundry alien races in the area, and an alien race called the Zhirrzh. The first contact very quickly degenerates into a space battle between Zhirrzh ships and human ships. The human ships get cut to ribbons. The Zhirrzh ships are apparently unaffected. Humans leave the battle convinced they have a real problem out there. They start calling these newcomers the Conquerors. Book One is from the human point of view, following mostly the Cavanagh family and they're having various problems against this backdrop. One of the Cavanagh sons was a captain on one of the ships that got cut up, and he is taken prisoner. They rest of the family has to find a way to find him and get him back. The second book shifts to the Zhirrzh point of view, and we follow a family called the Thurr. We find out there that they are starting to call us, the humans, the Conquerors, because from their point of view, humans started that battle. So both sides are convinced that an alien race called the Conquerors are coming to get them. The third book then will go back and forth. We gradually start realizing what happened and what each sides faulty assumptions were. Each side then must try to heal the conflict off before it gets to the point where no one can stop it. It was interesting writing from the Zhirrzh point

of view in the second book, *Conquerors' Heritage*. They've got an interesting physiological difference between them and humans, which makes for a vastly different society. I hope you will find that interesting when you get to that book.

**QUESTION FROM THE AUDIENCE:** When did you find an agent? Did you have any trouble?

**TZ:** I have no real horror story about finding an agent. My agent found me. I had been writing for *Analog* for a couple of years and published ten to fifteen stories. Then I got a letter from him. He was Stan Schmidt's agent as well, and when he found out that I didn't have an agent he wrote to see if I was interested in signing on. I had just, as a matter of fact, finished my first novel and was trying to figure out what the heck I do with this mound of paper. I sent it to him and he liked it. He sold it to the second publisher he tried it on, which was DAW. I've been with him ever since. So I haven't much advice on finding agents, except to watch out. There are some very good agents out there, and there are some very not-so-good agents. There are people who fancy themselves agents who don't seem to have any idea what they are doing.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** How well do you keep up with contemporary science?

**TZ:** Not nearly as well as I should. I try to read *Popular Mechanics* and try to keep up with the new stuff that's coming out, and try to get some idea of how miniaturization is going these days. Mostly, the stories I write allow me to make up most of the science as I go along. Also, even when I was in physics, I found a lot of the new stuff fairly dense and hard to get through. So, I would just recommend reading *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, and various magazines like that.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Do you have any interest in oral storytelling?

**TZ:** If I can't edit it, it's no good. I've done some readings at conventions. I try to do dramatic readings. I try to change my voices and such. It's more work than the result is showing. I am not a natural-born storyteller or reader, that sort of thing.

**AM:** Most of us speak in first draft. Most stories require revisions. [Laughter.]

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Would you like to make any comments on the new *Star Trek* series?

**TZ:** How many Trekkies here am I likely to offend? I actually stopped watching *Next Generation* after the two-part episode with Spock in it, because it struck me that the writers, or whoever was doing the final versions of the scripts, had forgotten what they had. They were rewriting modern, historical events, news headlines, in this case the re-uniting of Germany without any concept of whether this really works in the *Star Trek* universe. The last couple of movies, it again struck me that they didn't understand. They've got Spock putting an invisible patch on the back of Kirk's uniform, that is transmitting across light-years. There's no concept of the power you need to do this. There's no concept that the Klingons would have their receivers blown halfway across their empire by this thing, and firing Kirk in the process. I remember stories about the D.E.W. Line

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radar. [Defense Early Warning radar system, designed to detect incoming Soviet missiles.] You could fry fish on the radar antenna. What bothered me about *Next Generation*, before I stopped watching, was that it didn't seem to me that they had people behaving as people should. The characters were doing things that did not seem right from the point of view of the person who was set up. Let me pick on the *Star Trek: The Undiscovered Country*. That's the one where I really wanted to run out of the theater afterwards. Motivations just did not ring true. The Klingons imprison Kirk, in his uniform, instead of prison garb, which is not normally done. They allowed him to escape, but they allowed him to escape all the way to where he could be rescued, instead of just wiping him out just outside the prison walls. The big one for that movie was that you had a situation of two people on opposite sides, one in the Federation and one the Klingon Empire, who pulled this thing off, two people who do not trust each other, who hate each other, conspiring to commit murder and treason together. Now this does not strike me as a logical approach from either side. Pick some American general who hates the Russians, and a Russian general who hates the United States. Are they going to agree to commit treason together? No, they will each assume the other guy is setting them up to take the fall and so his words of wisdom will be cut out from his country's council. Things like that. They way competent people behave. They didn't ring true. People make mistakes, but do you really have a Romulan admiral locking Spock, Data, and Picard in a room with a working computer? This is something a corporal might do, but admirals are not supposed to do this sort of thing. It kept jarring me out of the story. No. This is not right. Suddenly I am just watching a TV screen or a movie screen instead of being into a story. It's a shame, I think. *Star Trek* had a great potential. My personal feeling is that somebody at the top decided, "We've got a built-in audience. We don't have to do our best." I'm more saddened by that than angered.

**AM:** I am surprised that you didn't mention an even grosser blunder in the same film, *Star Trek VI*, which was that during the prison escape, there is this shape-changer, who assumes the form of, not the Easter Bunny, not Santa Claus, not Zsa Zsa Gabor, but Captain Kirk, at precisely the moment the guards show up with the intention of shooting Captain Kirk. Now they have two, and of course they shoot the wrong one. But, since the shape-changer is not apparently suicidal, *the worst thing he can possibly do* is turn into the person they're going to shoot.

**TZ:** But, again, you shoot the prisoner on the beach at Alcatraz. You do not let him swim to San Francisco before saying, "Aha! We can shoot you!" Then you're talking about noisy explosions in space. Well, the first time they shut off the gravity in the Klingon ship, the guns started flying out of their holsters. Remember that? Excuse me. This doesn't happen. And the concept that Klingon warriors are not trained to fight in zero-G is ludicrous in the extreme.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Would your *Star Wars* books hold up for someone who hasn't seen the movies?

**AM:** Is there such a person?

**TZ:** I have no idea. There are enough references to the movies that you would miss, if you have not seen the films. The story itself, I think you could probably follow with no real problem. You just wouldn't know who you were talking about much. There are various

plot-twists that rely on things that happened or things that were revealed in the movies, but they're not the ultimate crux of the plot. I think you could take a shot at it. I would still recommend that you see the movies first, just for the fun of seeing what everyone else is talking about.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Have you been approached to adapt your books into other media?

**AM:** You mean his own books, not the *Star Wars* books?

**TZ:** West End Games has done the first of the *Star Wars* books for one of their role-playing games. I've worked a little back and forth with them. We have a good relationship. I know that Dark Horse Comics is apparently going to do a comic version of the *Star Wars* books. That was offered to me at one point. I figured out how many words I'd have to boil it down to and decided I can't do this. Otherwise, several years ago we had a couple of nibbles on one of my books for possible movie adaptation. Nothing came of it. I was approached by a TV producer, who wanted to do a TV series that I wrote the proposal for. He made the rounds with it and I haven't heard from him in quite a while, so that has also fallen through. So I have had a couple of nibbles here and there, but nothing even resembling a bite.

**AM:** It occurs to me that "Cascade Point" would work as a feature film. It's too good to be a *Star Trek* episode, though it is the same sort of story.

**TZ:** Oddly enough, the crew and ship of "Cascade Point" were what I adapted into the TV series idea. One of the things I object to in TV science fiction, and to some extent movie science fiction, is that Hollywood seems to feel that SF is two things, special effects and uniforms. Look at it. Every series seems to be some official branch of something. The Federation, Sea Quest, whatever. The concept I had for what I called *Interstellar Inc.* was a tramp freighter, working on a margin, much more the Han Solo type of thing. The guys have no authority. They are always getting into trouble. They yell at each other. They never make much money. They are a ways trying to get a little bit ahead. They're dealing with various aliens and officials and such, but they're the little guys. I've been waiting for something like that on TV, and I've offered it, and so far nobody has taken the bait. I would like to see some of Hollywood SF be the little-man approach to space opera. It's surprising, considering how popular Han Solo was, that nobody picked up on that sort of thing. The idea in Hollywood is, "*Star Trek* is popular. Let's copy *Star Trek*."

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Are you writing anything else along the lines of *Black Collar*?

**TZ:** I have one more *Black Collar* book I will get to Real Soon Now. I promise. What happened with *Black Collar* was that I finished the second book, and because of other ideas, other commitments, I went on to other projects. The next story wasn't quite ready to write at that point. I've somehow never gotten back to it. I would like to finish it someday. I get asked approximately twice per convention to finish it off. So keep nudging me and I will get it done sometime soon.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** What are your writing habits like?

## Timothy Zahn: An Interview

**TZ:** I would very much like to be a nocturnal writer. When you have a son in 7th grade it's not possible. The day starts at 7 o'clock, and you've got to haul him out of bed, feed him breakfast, and get him to school. So, generally I start working between 8:30 and 9 in the morning. I work till about 12:30 and have lunch. I continue on then until about 3:15, after which I have to go to school and get him. Generally I have not completed my quota of work, which is about 1000-1500 words per day. Fortunately he will have homework to do. He will work on the kitchen table and I will work in the next room over. So, rather than work a certain number of hours a day, I try to do words per day, again a thousand or fifteen hundred. The goal is five or six thousand a week. I generally take the weekends off. I sometimes work on correspondence on Saturday.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**TZ:** I go shopping. I put in a load of laundry. Generally after a day or so I work my way out of the problem. If there is a really serious snag, say in a chapter toward the end of the book, I will decide it's time for me to go back and read the whole story from the beginning, something to do while my subconscious is working on the problem. Depending on how complicated the snag is and how long I have spent working on it, I will despair of ever having become a writer in the first place, and wish I was in some simple line of work like cement-laying or something. Mostly, though it's a matter that a little time will work out. Sometimes it's a matter where I simply have to sit in front of the keyboard and write paragraph after paragraph until I get it right. You learn from experience which problems you can handle like that, and which ones you should leave alone for a couple of hours.

**AM:** Did you ever have a novel actually fail? You get part of the way in and you realize that you cannot finish it.

**TZ:** Not really. I think that is mostly because I have an outline. I know where it is going. I know all the plot twists. I know how I am getting from A to Z. I don't wind up with "Where do I go from here? I have no ending to this story! It's down the tubes." I may eventually have something like that. I've got a book now, for which I did 85,000 words before *Star Wars* came along. Bantam doesn't think it has enough action in it, so for now it's on the shelf. But it'll get done someday. I'm sure of it.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** How much care do you take in choosing names?

**TZ:** Do you mean book titles?

**FROM AUDIENCE:** Both titles and the names of characters.

**TZ:** I take different amounts of care depending on how important the characters are. For a major character, I will sift through a baby-name book, I will go through a dictionary, I'll try to find something that sounds interesting, that has the resonance that I want. Grand Admiral Thrawn is a case. "Thrawn" is actually a Scottish word meaning "twisted." "Mara" means bitterness. For minor names, for throw-aways, I generally drop down a couple of lines on my word-processor and put a few letters together until I find something that looks good and isn't going to be confused with something else I've already gotten in the book. It depends on how prominent the name is going to be. Book titles, I usually have before I start or

midway through. If I don't have it midway through, that generally means I'm going to have a bear of a time figuring out a title by the time I'm done. For most novels, though, I've had a title before I got to the end. So, most of the time titles are easy enough to do. Some of the time, editors will choose them for you. *Heir to the Empire* is not my original title. I liked the title *Wild Card*. Unfortunately there is a series called *Wild Cards* edited by George R.R. Martin, so the editor said, "Nope. You can't use that." A couple of other possibilities were *The Emperor's Hand*, and another was, let's see, *Warlord*, I think. Lou Aronica said, "None of those are action enough. Let's try *Heir to the Empire* instead." I don't see that as action, but I got the other two titles in the trilogy myself, so I guess I can let him have that one.

**AM:** You could always call it *Moby Dick*. No... Silverberg did that for *Amazing* in the '50s. Back when he was writing for the assembly-line *Amazing*, the editor always changed his titles anyway, so he has contracts proving he sold *Amazing Moby Dick*, *Crime and Punishment*, and so on.

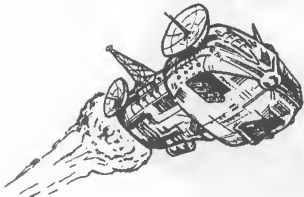
**TZ:** People often ask about that. You can't copyright titles. If I want to call a book *The Hunt for Red October*, I can do that. It wouldn't be a good idea. But I could.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** Do you ever put friends into your books?

**TZ:** I have put various friends into books, mostly just names rather than their whole personalities. The only case where I've put more in, was in "Deadman's Switch." The bodyguard was a friend of mine who was a martial artist. There was a line about how he was unfailingly polite, "the sort of person who would apologize for the inconvenience as he broke your neck." Mitch just loved that line. He said, "That's me, all right." He was also a character who started as a walk-on role and would up taking over the story. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

**QUESTION FROM AUDIENCE:** What is the next book due out?

**TZ:** *Conquerors' Heritage* will be out in July of 1995. We are trying to coincide with the NASFIC in Atlanta, and *Conquerors' Legacy* in July, 1996. My last *Star Wars* book will be out at the end of 1997. After that, I am free and have a couple of projects in mind. [Applause]





J.B. Ortiz

This is Leslie Lupien's first time in print. He hails from Canada.

## Sanitary Zone

by Leslie Lupien

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Merv's first battle began and ended within the space of a few heavy heartbeats.

The uproar outside the tank made Merv clap shaking hands to his ears while the unbearable dazzle on the flat screen TV monitors forced his eyes shut.

"It's over, Lieutenant. You can look now." Did Sergeant Grishin's voice carry a touch of scorn?

Merv gaped at the chaos unfolding on the visible light monitor. Miniature fighting vehicles blazed, exploded or fell apart. "What happened?"

Grishin turned in the driver's seat, the thin lips in his stern young face curled at one corner. "Can't you see? We lost the battle."

Merv blinked. Lost the battle? Just like that? The battalion's tankers had received enough warning from a recon jet to scramble into their vehicles. But the enemy's laser-guided missiles, swift and unstoppable, must have already been on their way. The cautionary nightmare pictured in staff meetings had become a reality.

Merv could not avoid a quaver. "How could we have failed to—"

"Don't ask me, Lieutenant. I am only a national army sergeant." Unmistakable insolence in the tone and manner.

Merv bristled. Maybe Grishin could see him only as a middle-aged militia reservist with a thick waist and no combat experience. Still he was entitled to respect as an officer.

"All right, Sergeant. Count how many of ours are left."

"Can you see any left—sir?"

Merv leaned toward the visible light monitor. "No." But Grishin and he had survived. How? Only one way. Grishin must have used the laser intercept to blind the missile headed for their tank and spin it off target. SOP if you could do it. Grishin alone had managed. Outstanding speed and skill or a miracle? It didn't matter. "At least you were wide awake, Sergeant."

Grishin grunted and buttoned off all the monitors.

Merv started to object, checked himself. Grishin knew what he was doing. Radar beams from their tank could bring down more enemy missiles. "Quick thinking, Sergeant."

Grishin grunted again.

They sat in silence, their world limited to the tank's cramped interior. The stuffy recycled air made Merv breathe harder. He gritted his teeth against the chatter in his mind. *Be grateful for being alive. But what to do? Will the enemy move on Koka? If so, nothing stands in his way except Grishin and me. But any move we could make, even turning on the radio to reach Corps, would be suicidal.*

Merv cleared his throat. "Sergeant, we have to know what's happening. Use the passive microwave."

Grishin bit his lower lip. "I don't know. A smart missile could pick us up."

"It's an order."

Grishin shrugged and pressed a button. Discordant images flickered on the microwave monitor screen, then settled into a

pattern. Gray slugs crept across a featureless dark plain.

"Anton's armor," Grishin put his face close to the microwave monitor. "At least seventeen. All around us, moving toward Koka—fast."

Merv forced out the words through a dry mouth. "Are you sure?" "Yes." Grishin buttoned off the microwave monitor. "Anton missed us. We will stay put for now."

Merv stifled a groan. Anton—the enemy—would park his armor safely outside Koka while his Special Forces sanitized the city with nerve gas. SOP in 2031. What would happen to Dorene and Tina?

"What's the matter with you? Did you hear what I said?"

Merv wiped sweat away from his eyelids with a bare hand.

"Yes... Grishin, do you have any family inside Koka?"

"No." Grishin opened and closed his mouth, flushed. "Your family should be all right, Lieutenant. They will be evacuated."

Merv smiled wanly as if to say "thanks." But he knew Grishin was wrong. He had never considered the possibility that almost the division's entire armored battalion would be destroyed or that Koka would fall to the enemy. Expecting nothing worse than chemical attack by air, he had told Dorene to take Tina to their private underground shelter at the first alarm and stay there until she received an all clear call.

Grishin removed two cartons of field rations from the backpack slung over his seat, hesitated, then held out one carton. "Dinner, Lieutenant? No use missing a meal."

Grishin's show of *sang-froid* annoyed Merv, but he took the carton and muttered "thanks."

"Two hours to dark, Lieutenant. If Anton lays any G gas on us, it should be dispersed by then."

Merv nodded and peered inside the carton without interest. Grishin was right as always. By dark the strong breeze should have carried away any nerve gas the enemy might spray in their direction. The could open the hatch and move by moonlight. But move where and for what purpose?

"We can still give Anton a kick in the butt." Grishin's stare posed a question blunt as any words. *Do you have the stomach for it, officer?*

Merv fumbled with the cellophane wrapper of a drumstick, embarrassed by the warmth flooding his cheeks as Grishin's eyes—demanding, curious—remained fastened upon his face.

"I know just the spot in the Celica pass just north of Koka."

A vision paralyzed Merv's tongue. Dorene and Tina sat stiffly on folding chairs before the vidphone in the tiny shelter underneath their bungalow. They waited for a reassuring face to appear on the vidphone, for a voice. "The emergency is over. Please resume your normal activities." They waited in vain.

"Do you agree?" Unmistakable challenge in Grishin's tone.

"We will do what we have to do." Merv expected Grishin to take that answer for agreement. Let him—for now. The Celica pass

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project sounded like suicide. One tank against maybe a whole battalion of Anton's. But he needed time to think of a way to get Dorene and Tina out of that bungalow shelter. Because if he didn't... He dared not think about *that*.

Grishin's smile seemed genuine. "I am glad you agree."

Grishin stared at Merv as if studying him, then removed a flat bottle from his knapsack and held it out. "It will help."

Merv understood the gesture. Possession of liquor while on duty called for severe disciplinary action in normal circumstances. Grishin must be anxious to show trust and build camaraderie.

"Thanks, Sergeant." Merv gulped down a generous draft before handing the bottle back. The brandy warmed him and cleared his mind. Now he knew what to do. Anton's G gas should have lifted from Koka by morning. Grishin and he could move north on the forest bypass road during the night, sneak into the suburbs at daylight, and take Dorene and Tina away riding on top of the tank. But would Grishin go along?

Grishin downed an even more generous draft and settled back in the padded driver's seat. "What do you do, Lieutenant—I mean out of uniform."

Grishin's bluntness annoyed Merv for an instant. But he had to win Grishin's good will. "I teach sociology at the university, Sergeant."

"Sociology?" Grishin squinted as if he were testing an unfamiliar morsel of food.

"The study of how people in a group behave."

"Oh." Grishin replaced the brandy bottle in his knapsack and rubbed his chin. "How do you think all this will end, Professor?"

Merv winced at the naivete of the question. He knew how "all this" would end. A jawing match over marginal advantage when mutual exhaustion had dampened ethnic tensions. The folk wars of the past forty years offered enough examples. But to say that might antagonize Grishin.

"I believe our government will decide to end it, unless the UN—"

"Uh. Huh. Know what I'm thinking, Lieutenant? We can go hatch open straight up the main highway and through Koka. Anton will have his vehicles buttoned down for the night and spread away from the highway for security."

"Hatch open?" Merv frowned. Anton's Special Forces should have finished their work by nightfall. The streets of Koka would be a sanitary zone, about as liveable as the surface of the moon.

"Not in the city. We'll have to seal and turn on all our monitors. Sure, Anton will pick us up. But I don't think he will do anything about it then. Koka is less risky than the forest road."

Merv frowned harder. What was Anton likely to do? He would not want to explode a smart missile inside Koka that might start an uncontrolled fire and burn up a lot of his new property. Neither would he probably want to send his armor into a sanitized zone at night to catch a single fleeing tank.

"Anton will probably wait until morning, then try to catch us in the Celica pass. Cat and mouse." Grishin grinned. "This mouse knows where to hide and where to bite. We can take out four or five of Anton's tanks, then run."

Merv stared at Grishin, fascinated and frightened. The man proposed extreme, almost suicidal, risks beyond the call of duty. Why? Not from devotion to the folk or an itch for martyrdom. Grishin was the typical professional soldier, prosaic, reality centered.

"We will have to keep careful count of our kills." Grishin flushed. "For Corps records."

Merv could not resist a faint smile at Grishin's flash of hypocrisy. He had his answer. Grishin's keen, narrow mind had made a calculation of risks and rewards. Grishin foresaw glory, promotion, maybe a commission.

"Are you with me—all the way?" Challenge in the rising intonation.

Merv did not wish to take extreme risks for the sake of a folk whom he no longer found either noble or rational. But he would agree to do so as the price for Grishin's help in saving Dorene and Tina. "Grishin, my family. I know they wouldn't go to one of the UN shelters."

"Oh." Grishin looked startled. "That means..." He did not need to say it. *Your wife and daughter will end up in one of Anton's holding pens, raped for sure, probably murdered.*

"Yes," Merv said. He could no longer keep his worst fears at bay.

"With that on your mind you will be no use to me." Grishin pursed his lips as if thinking hard. "Just your wife and a girl, isn't it? We should have time to take them to the nearest UN shelter. Satisfied, Lieutenant? Now are you with me on Celica pass?"

"With you, Sergeant." Tears of relief and gratitude gathered under Merv's eyelids.

"I'm reading red, Lieutenant."

The hatch began to close. Merv sighed and removed his elbows from the tank's laminated steel and aluminum top, reluctant to exchange the brisk night breeze for the stuffy, odorous interior of the tank.

"Better hurry. The G gas is close."

Merv took a last, regretful look through the field glasses he had used to guide Grishin. The highway, bone baru in the sheen from a full moon, ran between shadowed forest to end in a wall of bright light across the horizon about a half kilometer ahead.

"All lit up to welcome Anton." Grishin grimaced. "Our brave civil servants ran off without cutting the automated systems."

Sight and sound beyond the bridge confirmed Grishin's charge. Light from overhead lamps and unshaded windows chased shadows out of the street, empty mesh link people movers revolved in futile parabolas, discordant music from untended automated bands assailed the tank's audio system.

The dead appeared—most prone or supine on the streets or walkways, their bodies contorted from the instant of agony inflicted by the nerve gas. A small boy, legs entangled and head twisted sideward, still clutched at the door handle of a car inside which a young woman slumped over a steering wheel. A young man and a girl embraced, their lips frozen together, propped between the wall and half-open door of a restaurant.

Merv mechanically counted the bodies. Ten...fifteen. Unlucky souls who had failed or not tried to reach an UN shelter.

"Ever seen a sanitary zone before, Lieutenant?"

Merv shook his head and clamped his jaws in fear of an upsurge of vomit.

"You look like you are ready to puke. It's not so bad. My guess is about two hundred dead in the whole city. And no infrastructure damage."

Merv glared at Grishin, enraged by what he perceived as the man's callousness. *Only two hundred dead? And, how jolly, no infrastructure damage.*

## Sanitary Zone

"You think I'm a cold-blooded bastard?" Grishin's tone suggested irony rather than anger.

Merv folded his arms and pretended to study the visible light monitor as the tank turned into the shadowy boulevard that ran north through the suburbs. Anything he might say in his frame of mind could antagonize Grishin. He dared not do that.

The touch of Grishin's hand woke Merv from a fitful doze. "First light, Lieutenant. It won't be long."

Merv glanced at the chemical warfare sensor. Faint red. They could not open the hatch just yet. The visible light monitor showed a still shadowy stretch of suburban street ending at the boulevard. Grishin had insisted on stopping at the entrance of the cul de sac which fronted on Merv's bungalow.

Grishin held out a thermos. "Coffee?"

Merv wanted the coffee, but his resentment over Grishin's remark about the victims of the nerve gas still simmered. "No, thank you, Sergeant."

Grishin muttered an obscenity and began to sip coffee from a plastic cup. Merv and he sat in tense silence while the visible light monitor turned brighter. Suddenly, Grishin turned to confront Merv. "Would you like it the old way? Hundreds of houses and buildings smashed and burned? All those wooden crosses for people who starved or froze or were blown apart?"

Merv had heard cant from more articulate people than Grishin about how war had become relatively humane. It always disgusted him. But he dared not antagonize Grishin any further. "No."

"My father was a soldier in the first folk wars. He could tell you what a city looked like after it was fought over. And what happened to soldiers before nerve gas banished infantry from the battlefield. Faces ripped apart, heads blow off, intestines dangling. Would you like that better?"

Merv blinked with astonishment. His show of hostility must have actually wounded Grishin. And the man had a telling argument which he had expressed with feeling. "No, sergeant. I can understand—"

"Be quiet." Grishin downed the rest of his coffee in one gulp and hunched over the TV monitors. "Anton's coming. Listen."

Merv heard a rumble and saw a blip on the passive microwave monitor screen. A green light began flashing above the firing console to show that a target image was ready to be transferred into a shell's microcomputer for firing.

"How close, Grishir?"

"Too close." Grishin's fingers moved as if by reflex across the keyboard of the firing console. The flashing green light vanished. The tank's motor hummed to life.

Merv gasped with disbelief. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Heading for Celica pass. Sorry about your family. There isn't time."

"Make time." Merv clutched the sleeve of Grishin's leather jacket. "Load and fire, sergeant. That's an order."

Grishin locked eyes with Merv. "You can't mean that."

Merv fought down the panic and kept his voice level. "I will have your head, Grishin, if you don't take out that tank. I will charge you with cowardice and mutiny. We are going to save my family."

"Your family?" Grishin shook off Merv's hand. "How about the others?"

"The others?"

"The thousands in the UN shelters."

Merv shook his head in bewilderment. Grishin knew as well as he that Anton would ask the UN to evacuate the people from the UN shelters. That was the way the game was played. "What are you talking about?"

"You can't be so ignorant." Grishin's voice rasped with exasperation. "Remember Korador?"

Korador? Merv strove to remember. A town of a few hundred that Anton sanitized. A sniper opened fire on Anton's tanks in the sanitary zone. Anton by some accounts retaliated. Charges and counter charges flew for months. "No one knows what happened—"

"I know!" Grishin's eyes glittered. "I helped retake Korador. Anton turned high powered microwave generators on the people in the UN shelters. He burned their retinas with low powered lasers. To teach us a lesson. Want to hear more, Lieutenant?"

"No." Merv had heard the stories and could picture what happened. Women, children and old people screamed and twisted into inhuman shapes while the heat from Anton's microwave generators peeled off their skin and boiled their bones. They bumped into each other in their last agonies, blinded by Anton's low powered lasers. Propaganda? No. *Grishin had seen it*.

Grishin touched his keyboard. The green target image indicator began flashing above the firing console. "You do it, Lieutenant. You have thirty seconds."

Merv tried to banish the images of Korador and picture Dorene and Tina, naked and shivering with fear, in one of Anton's holding pens. Wasn't a man's first responsibility to his own? He unbuckled his safety belt so he could reach the keyboard.

The images of Korador danced through the images of Dorene and Tina.

"Ten seconds, Lieutenant."

Merv extended a hand toward the keyboard, but the maddening images blinded him so he could not find the firing key. He clamped both hands to his eyes.

"See, you can't." Grishin's voice seemed to come from a distance.

The sudden motion of the tank slammed Merv back into his seat. When he unblocked his eyes, the green light above the firing console had vanished.

"I knew you couldn't," Grishin said.

Merv's body shook beyond control. From grief. And from shame. He had failed Dorene and Tina. And he had almost failed himself. How close had he come to pressing that firing button? He would never be sure.

"Celica pass, sir?"

Merv nodded, unable to speak.

"I am sorry, sir. I am truly sorry." Grishin held out the brandy bottle. "Don't say no. It will help."

Merv knew the brandy would not help. But he could not offend Grishin again. This simple man, whom in his intellectual arrogance he had spurned as insensitive and self-centered, had saved him from committing a monstrous wrong.

"Thank you, Sergeant," Merv said. The brandy burned his throat.



## Absolute Magnitude Book Reviews

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*Memento Mori* by Shariann Lewitt  
Tor Books, 288 pages, \$21.95  
ISBN 0-312-85625

I really enjoyed Lewitt's last novel, *Songs of Chaos*, and was greatly looking forward to *Memento Mori*. Some of the advance reviews of *Memento* were less than enthusiastic, and I was a bit worried that it might not be up to Lewitt's usual high standards. After reading the book I came to understand the bad reviews, which had little to do with the book: *Memento Mori* is a scathing rebuke of the literati, the very people who had reviewed the book and not liked it. I can understand reviewers of that stripe looking in the mirror and not liking what they see. This is a truly marvelous book, however. The writing is skillful and stylish and the science is cutting edge—you can't really ask for a lot more from a book. I recommend it to anyone who's not a self-important, pretentious critic. If you are the self-important, pretentious type, you might want to skip this one.

—Lucas Gregor

*Chicks in Chainmail* edited by Esther Friesner  
Bantam Books, 341 pages, \$5.99  
ISBN 0-671-87682-1

This anthology, edited by Esther Friesner, is about reclaiming the image of the Warrior Woman in the chainmail bikini or the bronze bra, while having lots of fun with it. About two thirds of the twenty-one stories are by women, the rest (obviously) by men. Beneath the surface, there are themes such as the power of the Divine Feminine and of women in general, reclaiming our monthly cycles, and living in harmony with nature; however, they are all handled with such a light touch that it never becomes preachy. Some of my favorite stories were "Lady of Steel," a short-short by Roger Zelazny; Josepha Sherman's "Teacher's Pet," about a female knight's encounter with a somewhat inept sorcerer; Friesner's "The

Way to a Man's Heart" (not *everyone* is meant to be a mighty swordswoman); "The Guardswoman," by Lawrence Watt-Evans, a series of letters from the only female member of the City Guard to her mother; and, especially, Jan Stirling's "Were-Wench," in which a soldier cursed by a sorcerer finally learns to let her heart have its way. Surprise favorites were "Exchange Program," by Susan Schwartz, which gives us Hilary Rodham Clinton in Valhalla if not in chainmail; Nancy Springer's story of a guardian angel and her timid charge, "Whoops!"; and especially "Blood Calls to Blood," an extremely well-written story of a modern warrior woman facing down the elves who have snatched her child, by Elisabeth Waters. Highly recommended for women (and men) who like strong female characters and a sense of humor that laughs with, rather than at, them.

—Angela Kessler

*Tomorrow Bites*, edited by Greg Cox & T. K. F. Weisskopf  
Bantam Books, 364 pages, \$5.99  
ISBN 0-671-87691-0

*Tomorrow Bites*, a collection of "Tales of Scientific Lycanthropy," is a companion volume to *Tomorrow Sucks*, Baen's earlier collection of "Tales of Scientific Vampirism." The first story in this anthology is Michael Flynn's "Werewarehouse," a story of nanotechnology-assisted shapeshifting. Next, we are treated to Poul Anderson's delightful "Operation Afreet," set in an alternate reality where magic is science, and James Blish's classic werewolf tale, "There Shall Be No Darkness," with its cheerfully pseudo-scientific explanation for lycanthropy. Larry Niven's "There's a Wolf in my Time Machine" involves a time-machine that needs a tuneup. Easily my favorite story here is Jane Mailander's strangely touching, profoundly affecting "Wolf Enough." Michael Swanwick's excellent "Midwinter's Tale" features telepathic

wolf-like aliens on another planet. The weirdest story is Gere Wolfe's "The Hero as Werewolf." A. Bertram Chandler's "Frontier of the Dark" gives us genetic regression and parallel evolution. Also included are short-stories by Clark Ashton Smith, "A Prophecy of Monsters" and John J. Ordover, "flowerW". The last story is "Werewolves of Luna," by R. Garcia y Robertson, which takes place mostly in virtual reality and in which the only "werewolf" is a dog-like sentient ET. The stories are bookended by essays by Cox and Weisskopf, respectively. The stories in *Tomorrow Bites* are no mere literary snacks: the average story length here, excluding the two short-stories, is nearly 40 pages. In other words, this book gives you something to sink your teeth into!

—Angela Kessler

*Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Characters*, by Andy Mangels  
Del Rey, 199 pages (oversize), \$18.00  
ISBN 0-345-39535-2

What saves this book from being yet another dry, factual recital of what most Star Wars fans already know is Andy Mangels' prose. Reading this book was often like reminiscing with a group of friends about the movies. Mangels has an easygoing style that makes this book astonishingly enjoyable and easy to read. He takes each character, no matter how minor or major, and describes in rich and loving detail exactly what role that character played within the storyline. The book has been researched exhaustively, but it remains clear and concise.

The original trilogy, television shows, radio shows, comic books, roleplaying games, books, and even technical journals have been utilized in Mangels' comprehensive search for information. Each character description is prefaced by basic facts: species, sex, physical description, political affiliation, weapons and vehicles of choice. When possible,

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the story in which that character was introduced is included in this basic description. With the passion of a fan, Mangels goes on to give their known history and, even more impressively, what impact (if any) that character may have had on others.

The greatest strength of this book is the way that Mangels' encyclopedic knowledge of Star Wars is combined with his character descriptions. Through his descriptions, the entire Star Wars saga is seamlessly woven together into one story. Mangels allows us to read Star Wars from beginning to end with a totally different perspective. The characters themselves provide a unique insight into Star Wars. Finally someone has written a truly essential guide to the characters that have made the Star Wars universe such a rich and imaginative place.

—Pam Meek

***The Fire Rose***, by Mercedes Lackey  
Baen Books, 433 pages, \$22.00  
ISBN 0-671-87687-2

What do you get when you mix early 19th century history with werewolves and Elemental magic? The answer, an often humorous, surprisingly enjoyable new fantasy by Mercedes Lackey. The plot is original, set in 1905 at the start of the Woman's Suffrage movement and only a few months before the great fire that burned San Francisco to the ground. Our story begins in occult enough, detailing the trials of Rosalind Hawkins, a young doctoral candidate who, with the death of her father, finds herself distressingly penniless. She is hired by the enigmatic rail baron Jason Cameron to be governess to his two children. Arriving at Mr. Cameron's estate, Rosalind discovers a few disturbing facts, the least of which is that there are no children. In a masterful bit of manipulation, Jason convinces her to stay. Add to this the fact that Jason is a master of the element of Fire, uses Salamanders to do his bidding, and has horribly bungled a shapeshifting spell which has left him frozen in the shape of a wolf, and let your imagination soar!

Mercedes Lackey's greatest strength has always been her characterization, and *The Fire Rose* is no exception. Rose's induction to Jason's secret is masterfully written, and Jason Cameron is the perfect

portrayal of a romantic playing a perpetually irritated curmudgeon. The wordplay between the two is sly and swift. The ridiculousness of Rose's position is seamlessly woven into the storyline through the dialogue until it is perfectly believable. The line between fantasy and reality blurs as Jason falls in love with Rose. Jason realizes the hopelessness of the situation so long as he remains trapped as a wolf, and reflects with bitter humor that kissing him would be "like kissing an Alsatian."

This is not to say that all is perfect within the story. Lackey continues to struggle with resolution and with the characterization of evildoers, who lack depth and fail to truly concern the reader.

The plot staggers regrettably at the end, whizzing instead of soaring to the promised conclusion; the finale seems rushed, as though Lackey herself was in a hurry to end the book. The conflict and resolution are over within minutes, and one finishes the book with a vague sense of having missed the point. However, these problems are minor when taken with the book as a whole, and *The Fire Rose* distinguishes itself as one of the most refreshing fantasy novels on the bookshelf today.

—Pam Meek

***Once Around The Bloch, An Unauthorized Biography*** by Robert Bloch

Tor Books, 416 pages, \$14.95  
ISBN 0-312-85373-3

As the subtitle suggests, Bloch's biography is rather whimsical and humorous, but interesting nevertheless. As one might expect of the author of *Psycho*, Bloch had a unique and interesting life. I found every aspect of the book fascinating, and of course the writing was wonderfully witty. The chapters dealing with his involvement with a mayoral candidate's campaign were simply marvelous.

In this Tor de force (pun intended) of an autobiography, Bloch takes us on a guided tour of his life. We start with his childhood in Chicago during the Depression era and move steadily through to the present era. Throughout his life Bloch came into contact with famous people that ranged from H.P. Lovecraft to Joan Crawford. His writing

career took him from ad copy to Hollywood screenplays, though, fiction was always his true love. Bloch recalls his life with poignant clarity. Before reading *Once Around The Bloch*, I wasn't a fan of Bloch's, having only read a few of his short stories, but after finishing his autobiography I have become one.

I would heartily recommend this book to any one looking for a good read. Weather or not you were a fan of Bloch's work you'll be able to appreciate his life story.

—Lucas Gregor

***An Armory Of Swords*** Edited by Fred Saberhagen

Tor Books, 317 pages, \$21.95  
ISBN-312-85414

Being a fan of Fred Saberhagen's Swords books, it was with much trepidation that I approached this anthology. The results of an author opening their worlds to others are often mixed at best. I'm happy to report that for the most part the stories in this anthology are successful.

The first story in the anthology is "Blind Man's Blade" and it's by Fred Saberhagen. This story alone was worth the price of admission. It's a delightful tale of what can happen when magical tools that are powerful enough to work against the gods themselves fall into the hands of mortals.

Walter Jon Williams' story "Woundhealer" was a resounding success as was "Fealty" by Gene Bostwick. "Dragon Debt" by Robert E. Vardeman met with mixed results. The story was well written and compelling, but the coincidences that propelled it along its way were a bit hard to swallow.

I didn't like the story by Thomas Saberhagen (Fred Saberhagen's son), it seemed a bit over-written; and Michael A. Stackpole's story "Luck of the Draw" also left me cold. Sage Walker and Pati Nagle rounded out the anthology with solid stories.

—Lucas Gregor

***Melrin's Bones*** By Fred Saberhagen  
Tor Books, 350 pages, \$5.99  
ISBN 0-812-53349-6

## Absolute Magnitude

Fred Saberhagen is one of my favorite writers. I've always been able to count on enjoying anything with his name on it. For the most part this is true with *Merlin's Bones*. It's a solid Arthurian story, despite Arthur appearing as nothing more than a stage prop, in that he's unconscious through the entire book. Saberhagen, as he has begun to do in his vampire novels, plays with the nature of time. This adds a nice dimension to the book, as you can never be sure that anything is as simple as it seems, and quite often you can be sure that nothing is as simple as it seems.

The book centers around Merlin's desire to rebuild Camelot. Through some curious events a strange and mixed group of people gather at the site of the new Camelot. Merlin, through his awesome magical powers, has constructed a small castle on the spot. This is truly impressive as he was already dead at the time. Under the castle hide his bones. Within his bones are locked all of the powers that he wielded in life, and anyone in possession of these bones would be able to harness these powers. Several groups vie for the bones, although Merlin himself has no intention of letting them go.

The story is told through both first-person and third-person narrative. The third-person narrative was considerably more effective than the first person. This was due mainly to the fact that the first-person narrative switched back and forth between several characters and nothing in their narrative voices distinguished them from one another.

I was pulled along by the power of Saberhagen's writing, but at the end I was unsatisfied. I don't know if he plans a sequel to this one, but the ending resolved very little. I was left wondering if Saberhagen had just run out of steam or if I'd have to wait for another book to see what really happened.

### *Dancing Bears* By Fred Saberhagen

Tor Books, 349 pages, \$23.95

ISBN 0-312-85798-5

*Dancing Bears* is set in Russia in 1906. The protagonist, an American big game hunter named John Sherwood, accompanies his college friend Gregori Lomatski to the Lomatski estate to help the Lomatskis hunt down a bear that has

been killing peasants in the area. When they arrive they find that Gregori's father has been killed by this bear and that Greg's younger brother Maxim is in charge. Of course, the bear turns out to be Maxim, who has inherited the family curse of *obersten-medved*. He has been using the bear form to remove people who do not see eye-to-eye with him politically. Maxim quickly moves to have Greg exiled to Siberia, and attempts to kill Sherwood, who has escaped with Natalya Lomatski (Greg and Maxim's sister). Maxim turns Sherwood into an *obersten-medved* when he botches his attempt to kill the hunter. Sherwood and Natalya predictably fall in love and go off in an attempt to rescue Greg.

From there the book has nowhere to go but down hill. Sherwood and Natalya follow Greg all the way to Siberia, as does Maxim. By the time Maxim arrives in Siberia he has completely lost his mind, which takes any power that might have been in the climax out of it. Sherwood and Natalya are too late to save Greg who dies just as they find him. In fact, they are even too late to have a true confrontation with Maxim, who dies when an ice castle (it's not even worth explaining) that he is forcing native Siberians to build is washed away in the spring thaw. From there Natalya and Sherwood turn around and leave and *Dancing Bears* comes mercifully to a whimpering end. I really don't know what to say about this book, it seemed ill-conceived at best. The book went nowhere and had none of the strengths that I've come to expect of Saberhagen. The only explanation I can think of for this book is that Saberhagen perhaps wanted to evoke the feel of Russian nihilist writing from the early nineteen hundreds. If this is so, he failed.

—Lucas Gregor

### *Alvin Journeyman* by Orson Scott Card

Tor Books, 384 pages, \$24.95

ISBN 0-312-85053-0

Orson Scott Card is a masterful storyteller with an amazing stylistic command of the English language. *Alvin Journeyman* is the fourth book in the Alvin Maker series and it takes up where *Prentice Alvin* left off. For the two or three of you out there not familiar with the Alvin Maker series it takes place in

an alternate time line where folk magic is real. Card's strong knowledge and understanding of history allows him to show how folk magic might have changed the history of the American Frontier. I have been repeatedly stunned throughout all four volumes of this series by just how plausible the history, that Card presents us with, is.

This Volume follows both Alvin and his brother Calvin. Alvin is desperately trying to teach others how to become makers. Calvin the only other person with natural making ability is completely unsuited for it. He is much more suited to unmaking than making. When Alvin doesn't teach Calvin secrets that he is giving away to people without any real ability in making, Calvin decides to go off in search of another teacher. Promising himself that once he has learned all that the wide world has to offer that he will come back and "show" Alvin just who the better maker is.

The two brothers make interesting counter parts. Calvin who is totally self centered has very little trouble finding teachers and getting the things out of life he is after while Alvin who is completely altruistic is met by perils and disappointments at every turn. The book ends with the two on a collision course towards one another. The book could have ended with "The End, So far." I'm anxious to find out how events will play out. I hope, as do Card's legions of fans, that he doesn't wait as long to write the next book in this series as he did to write this one.

—Lucas Gregor

### *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus* by Orson Scott Card

Tor Books, 351 pages, \$23.95

ISBN-312-85058-1

*Pastwatch* takes place in the far future after mankind has overcome its violent tendencies and all is right with the world. Or is it? While everyone believes that the world is doing well, it is later learned that Earth will not be able to support human life for very much longer. The *Pastwatch* program, who have until now only watched the past, realize that they must find a way to change the past in order to save the human race. This will, of course, mean that if they save the human race

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they will cease to exist. While exploring the past they discover that the past has already been changed by an earlier past that must have also failed. This past turned Columbus from his desire to conquer Constantinople and break the back of Islam to his desire to find an alternate route to Asia. It is decided that this is truly the most pivotal point in history. It is quite clear that turning Columbus from his trip of 1492 will not be enough. In the end it is decided to let Columbus sail, but to strand him in the New World. Three members of the Pastwatch return to the past to help make a better world.

Card's writing is extraordinary, and his grasp of history is impressive. The first three hundred and twenty pages of *Pastwatch* kept me completely enthralled. Card's comments on the past are learned and well worth taking note of. Unfortunately, the book fell flat for me in the last thirty pages. The bulk of the book covers only a few years and then the very end of the book covers the rest of history. Card's tight narrative grip is thereby loosened and his exposition cannot hope to live up to his engaging prose. Parts of this book are, as I said, extraordinary. I just wish Card had chosen to split this story up into several books. This could have been a masterpiece.

—Lucas Gregor

*Harvest The Fire* by Poul Anderson  
Tor Books, 190 pages, \$19.95  
ISBN 0-312-85943-0

Poul Anderson's *Three Hearts and Three Lions* was one of the first genre books that I ever read. I've been reading and enjoying his work now for more than a decade and I must confess that I prefer his older work. *Harvest The Fire*, like much of Anderson's more recent work, just doesn't move very well. It would seem that he's trying to stay away from the quick page-turning style that made his Flandry stories such a joy to read. This is unfortunate, as it slows down what should have been a good book to the point where the reader just loses interest.

—Lucas Gregor

*Alastor* by Jack Vance  
Tor Books, 479 pages, \$25.95  
ISBN 0-312-85966-X

This omnibus edition brings all of the Alastor books together, for the first time, in one volume. It's beautifully packaged and has a stunning cover painting. Fans of Jack Vance are sure to love this volume; the Alastor books are Vance at his best.

Each of the books explores a different aspect of Alastor society and history. Though each book is handled with a slightly different style they go well together and form a seamless whole. Vance is one of masters.

—Ben Silver

*Lord Dunsany, Master of the Anglo-Irish Imagination* by S.T. Joshi  
Greenwood Publishing Group, 248 pages, \$55.00  
ISBN 0-313-29403

In this, the first full-length study of Lord Dunsany's work, S.T. Joshi explores Dunsany's place within the critical literary (especially Irish) community. Joshi does an admirable job of giving us a glimpse into the times in which Dunsany lived and created. Given the entire picture, it becomes clear just how important Lord Dunsany was to the early development of modern fantasy. Without Dunsany's ground breaking work the world of fantasy fiction would be a drastically different, and much less rich, place.

Dunsany's work has never truly won wide critical acclaim within the literary establishment. Joshi examines the factors that are responsible for this and explains why Dunsany's work should win critical acclaim from the literary establishment. When confronted with the incredible influence that Dunsany has exerted over the field of fantasy and horror, one has to agree with Joshi's assessment of Dunsany's rightful place in literary history.

I hope that this book does indeed help Dunsany's work get the recognition that it has for so long richly deserved.

Copies of this book may be ordered by credit card at 1-800-225-5800

—Ben Silver

*Past Imperative: Round one of The Great Game* by Dave Duncan  
AvoNova, 464 pages, \$22.00  
ISBN 0-688-14361-X

Dave Duncan, the award winning author of *A Handful of Men*, brings us the first volume of an ambitious new fantasy series. It is the story of two mortals caught up in a game that has been played from the beginning of time by god-like creatures.

Duncan weaves the elements of this epic together with a style that is completely his own. The reader is taken headlong on a journey through several alternate times lines that leaves them gasping for air. I'm sure Duncan will find a few new fans with this book.

—Ben Silver

*1901* by Robert Conroy  
Lyford Books, 374 pages, \$21.95  
ISBN 0-89141-537-8

In Robert Conroy's first novel, *1901*, his alternate history spins off from a neglected part of America's past. There was a brief war scare with Germany during the Spanish-American War. The Germans, lacking overseas bases, tried to seize the Philippines and to acquire Puerto Rico by pressure. Diplomacy (and the intervention of the British Navy) dissipated the threat. This history's Kaiser Wilhelm II chooses to force the matter. He launches an invasion of the United States with the most powerful army on Earth. Our inadequate army has been disbanded, our navy, dispersed worldwide. The Americans are initially routed. The Kaiser will twist our arm until our newly acquired empire is in German hands.

The dust-jacket gives it away—the good guys do win. Reaching that victory is the meat of the story, whose strength lies in the military confrontation and the political maneuvering behind the lines.

Our Civil War army must fight a European giant, with bloody results. We witness the real-world choices that would have been made by that age's historical figures. Much of the action is seen through the eyes of one of the novel's few fictional characters—army officer Patrick Mahan.

The book is not without flaws. Kaiser Wilhelm is a little too Furher-like; the German military is a little too Nazi-like, viewed as they are from the 1990's through the bloody glass of the Third Reich. President McKinley's heart attack, leaving the forceful Theodore Roosevelt in control, is a trifle too convenient.

## Absolute Magnitude

Interpersonal scenes are sometimes stiff, though that style fits the story's decade. All in all, however, the book is well worth the read.

—John Deakins

**Celestial Matters** by Richard Garfinkle

Tor Books, 348 pages, \$23.95

ISBN 0-312-85934-1

Richard Garfinkle's first SF novel arrives with a double claim: alternate history; alternate science. His world evolved from an Alexander the Great who, trained by Sparta, overthrew his father Phillip and established a globe-spanning Greek Empire. He returned rulership to the Delian League, dominated by Sparta and Athens, but his failed surge eastward into China sparked the early establishment of the Middle Kingdom of the Han Dynasty. Over the centuries, the two warring empires have divided the planet.

Meanwhile, Aristotle (Alexander's teacher) destroyed the Platonists and established his own philosophical science. Incredibly, that science works. Celestial bodies appear in the crystal spheres of the Ptolemaic universe. Spontaneous generation produces food animals. Matter is made of air, fire, earth, and water atoms. The Greek protagonist, Aias, is about to fly his moon-matter ship to Helios to steal a piece of the solar fire. The countering Middle science is based on the flow of Xi forces through a Taoist universe; however, both sciences have long been warped into external war research, neglecting internal philosophy. A crisis has arrived because each desperate camp, for different reasons, feels that theirs will soon be the losing side.

Garfinkle does establish a passable alternate history and an interesting universe. His narrator's style and his action scenes are believably in character. His second claim, however, goes a step too far. The Greek gods are treated as real, present, and active throughout the book. That one feature makes *Celestial Matters* fantasy, based on bizarre, classical "science," instead of alternate history/alternate science. If you crave romance, you will find only a thimbleful in Aias' chaste love for a female Cherokee Spartan commando. You may also be put off by the smallish volume's

thumping big retail price. The otherwise very readable novel is self-consistent, and the author's careful research and hard work are apparent everywhere.

—John Deakins

**Host** by Peter James

Villard Books/Random House, Inc., 470 pages, \$25.00

ISBN 0-679-43733-9

Peter James' move from horror fiction has produced a hard-to-define page-turner: a sci-fi techno-thriller, edged in horror. Imagine Fatal Attraction meets 2001, with a heavy dose of Octagon and Poltergeist.

Professor Joe Messenger, a major player in the computer/AI field in the coming decade, is obsessed with producing physical immortality. Joe has created ARCHIVE, a super-computer on the verge of self-awareness. His secondary purpose is to upload/download human consciousness into such a computer—electronic, post-biological immortality. His colleagues are near a breakthrough in the cryonic preserving and re-animating of frozen (i.e. dead) clients.

A brilliant, seductive, terminally ill grad student, Juliet Spring, comes crashing into Joe's life, threatening his marriage. She has almost achieved human uploading and downloading. Attaching herself to Joe like a sexual vampire, she threatens his family's stability, only to die before reaching her goal—immortality. Just as things begin to return to normal, bizarre computer-based accidents strike at Joe's family. His supposedly un-hackable ARCHIVE is being tampered with in major ways. The reader will soon have no doubt about what has happened (though the protagonists take an inordinate amount of time to figure it out.) Juliet has succeeded in downloading her malignant consciousness into ARCHIVE.

Another villain lurks in the background, manipulating a re-animated girl, with Juliet's dangerous persona as a parasitic stowaway.

James has done his homework well. The epilogue stumbles slightly, but the novel is laced through with a convincing themes of the unfeeling horrors of humanistic immortality and lack of ethical accountability in science. Though

it is not "pure" science fiction, you will enjoy this one.

—John Deakins

**Red Planet Rising** by Andrew W. Seddon

Crossway Books, 240 pages, \$9.99

ISBN 0-89107-825-8

Dr. Seddon's first foray from article writing into Christian science fiction is less than satisfying. On Mars, a century-and-a-half from now, Maranan, an anti-Christian, cultist prophet, slithers into control of the government. His weapons are a hard core of fanatics, among them illegal human clones, with whom he has replaced key officials. His plan is to ultimately remove humans from Mars, to be replaced with genetically adapted "panthropes." He worships the spirit of Mother Mars and communicates with a sinister spirit guide.

Facing down the conspiracy are Security Major J. I. Duschene and his wife Captain Carolyn McCourt. The Security chief struggles with religious commitment throughout the narrative, but his wife has strong Christian leanings. Seddon's pictures future theology as the United World Church, an all-embracing confederation of beliefs dominated by neo-pagans. Fundamentalist Christians, refusing to be assimilated, have become a persecuted minority.

A seeker of hard SF will be disappointed. A fan of "soft" science fiction will find "soft science" instead. Any sharp eye for logical detail will be frustrated. The author is careless with everything from flight time between planets to clone mind programming to vacuum integrity on Mars. Despite a fairly well-constructed plot and a careful, non-preachy handling of Christianity, the author falls just short of that "suspension of disbelief" that fiction requires. The science, society, and religion of his future are hard to swallow. Look for this large paperback with other pricey fiction in Christian book stores. Don't look for it in the science fiction section anywhere else.

—John Deakins

**Mad Amos** by Alan Dean Foster

Del Ray, 275 pages, \$5.99

ISBN 0-345-39362-7

Mad Amos is a collection of inter-connected short stories about a mountain man named Amos. The collection is light,

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witty, and fun. Foster shows himself to be a deft storyteller, and I rather liked the collection. I could have lived without a description of Amos in each story, but since the stories were published independently, this probably couldn't have been helped. "Mad" Amos Malone rides through the Old West, on a unicorn (disguised as a horse) named Worthless, in search of magical adventures; or perhaps magical adventures are searching for him. One can never be sure. He faces a stagecoach-robbing dragon, a nightmare train fueled by the ghosts of ancient Indians, and a maniacal kitchen witch, to name just a few of his adventures.

Foster has a good feel for both the fantasy and the western genre and he mixes the two deftly. When I picked up the book I didn't expect much from such a hybrid; it's nice to be pleasantly surprised occasionally. I recommend this to anyone looking for a change of pace in the fantasy field.

—Lucas Gregor

*Through the Breach* by David Drake  
Ace Books, 327 pages, \$5.99  
ISBN 0-441-00326-5

David Drake is one of the best-known writers of military science fiction writing today. He does not disappoint with *Through the Breach*. We are reintroduced to Piet Ricimer and Stephen Gregg, the heroes of *Igniting the Reaches*. While *Through the Breach* is designed to be a stand-alone novel, I would not recommend reading it without first reading *Igniting the Reaches*. Some of the characterization would be lost on any reader not familiar with the earlier book.

The point-of-view character in this book is not Stephen Greg as it was in the previous one, but Jeremy Moore. Moore is a minor gentleman with wishes to rise above his station and to a large extent himself. He sees the expedition that Ricimer and Gregg are mounting as an opportunity to do just that. Gregg thinks very little of Moore and turns him down for a berth on the ship. Moore is not so easily dissuaded and does manage to get himself onto the ship before liftoff. What follows is a grand adventure worth reading. I'm looking forward to the third book.

—Lucas Gregor

*The Wind After War* by Chris Bunch  
Del Ray, 263 pages, \$5.99  
ISBN 0-345-38735-X

Chris Bunch was half of the best-selling duo of Bunch and Cole. *Shadow Warrior*, *Book One of The Wind After War*, is Chris Bunch's first solo book, and as such I'm sure many people will pick it up to see if he has it on his own. Since Bunch's first solo story appeared here in *Absolute Magnitude* last issue, *AW* readers already know that he does indeed have it.

Unlike Bunch and Cole's most recent novels *Shadow Warrior* is a work of science fiction. The back ground is rich and the situations Bunch puts before us are believable. The protagonist, Joshua Wolf, was a hero in "The Great War" against the Al'ar. The war ended when the Al'ar, realizing that they were losing, all just disappeared. It would seem that they chose mass suicide to being conquered by humans. But Wolf knows that nothing is at it seems. Through a series of events and adventures, Wolf begins to realize that humanity is in danger from a religious order called the Chitet. The book ends with Wolf and Taen, the last of the Al'ar, joining forces and heading off to confront the Chitet.

*Shadow Warrior* is deftly written and pulls the reader along effortlessly. This series promises to be some of the best space opera to come along in years.

—Lucas Gregor

*Higher Education* by Charles Sheffield  
and Jerry Pournelle  
Tor Books, 288 pages, 21.95  
ISBN 0-312-86174-5

I can't say enough good things about *Higher Education*. It reads like the best of the Del Ray and Heinlein juveniles—that is, very entertaining for teens and yet weighty enough for adults to enjoy as well. This will be the first book in Tor's new project, the *Jupiter* novels. From the press release that came with the book it looks as though Tor is truly excited by the *Jupiter* novels. And if *Higher Education* is any indication of the quality of the rest of the line they have every reason to be excited and proud.

The protagonist of *Higher Education*, Rick Luban, is trapped in an education

system that is designed to make him feel good about himself and graduate him. Unfortunately it, doesn't matter if he learns anything during his time in school. Rich manages to get himself kicked out of school for playing a practical joke on the wrong person. This turns out to be the best thing that could have happened to him. One of his teachers forces Rich to see himself as he really is: a spoiled brat with no future. He then suggests that he talk with Vanguard Mining as they are recruiting, and maybe, just maybe, he can become something despite himself. Rich is selected to go out to the asteroid belt and try to prove that he has what it takes to become an asteroid miner. Along the way he becomes embroiled in corporate espionage and manages to grow up.

This was a wonderful book. It's well paced and well thought out—some of the best hard sf I've seen in a while.

—Lucas Gregor

*Pirates of the Universe* by Terry Bisson  
Tor Books, 320 pages, \$22.95  
ISBN 0-312-85412-9

I have mixed feeling about *Pirates of the Universe*. It seemed to me that Bisson couldn't make up his mind if he was writing an adventure novel or a satire. The book did have its moments and despite my misgivings about it, it did pull me along to the conclusion. I just wish I could have figured out if I was supposed to take it seriously or take it as a comment on the state of adventure fiction. At any rate, it's worth a read.

—Lucas Gregor

*Fantastic Alice*, Edited by Margaret Weis  
Ace Books, 291 Pages, \$12.00  
ISBN 0-441-00253-6

*Fantastic Alice* is an anthology of stories set in Lewis Carroll wonderland universe. Unfortunately, most of the writers in this anthology were unable to evoke the magic of Carroll. This would have been a tall order to fill for any writer. I came away with the feeling that a number of writers had never actually read Carroll, but were relying on the Disney cartoon for their information. More than one of the writers tipped their hands to this fact. If you're looking to return to Wonderland, I would suggest staying away from this book. If you'd like

## Absolute Magnitude

to see how modern-day writers tackle Wonderland, then *Fantastic Alice* may be of some interest. Of the more readable stories, Lawrence Watt-Evans "Something to Grin About" was amusing, and Jane M. Lindskold's "Teapot" was by far the most delightful story in the anthology. "Teapot," more than any other story, captured the essence of Wonderland.

—Lucas Gregor

**Remnant Population** by Elizabeth Moon  
Baen Books, 339 pages, \$22.00  
ISBN 0-671-87718-6

I picked up Elizabeth Moon's *Remnant Population* with some reservations. It just didn't look like the type of book that I usually enjoy. Of course, one of things about being a reviewer is that you don't always get to choose what you'll be reading. So with reluctance I opened the book and began reading. I was immediately impressed with the accessible style that drew me into the book effortlessly. Elizabeth Moon, I discovered, is an impressive talent. If you haven't encountered her work yet I would suggest seeking it out; it's well worth the effort.

*Remnant Population* takes place on the colony world 3245.12. Sims Bancort has just lost their franchise license to the planet. Since the settlers of planet 3245.12 are no more than chattel, this means that they will have no choice but to leave the planet. The oldest member of the settlement, Ofelia Falfurrias, decides that she's not leaving. When the appointed time for departure comes, Ofelia simply walks into the woods and hides. Sims leaves her behind, though they alter their records to show that she was indeed on board the ship at liftoff, and it is suggested that their records will show that she died while in cryo on route to a new planet. The company taking over the franchise chooses a more habitable spot for their colony. Unfortunately, that spot is already occupied by an intelligent race that human technology has failed to detect. The humans inadvertently destroy the "aliens'" nesting grounds, and the aliens then destroy the human settlement in return. From here the aliens decide that they must explore the previous settlement since the killers of their children are

obviously related to the settlement further south. Ofelia and the indigenous race discover one another just as a tropical storm hits the settlement. The old woman helps them into her shelter and saves their lives. From here the two cultures begin to learn of one another. Eventually, the inevitable investigation by the consortium takes place and the military and scientific representatives arrive on the planet. By this time Ofelia and the new race have come to understand and respect one another.

What follows is a wonderful and scathing insight into a culture that values knowledge over wisdom. It is not hard to recognize this condemnation of Western culture. It is also nearly impossible not to agree with Moon's observations. I've always agreed that the Western habit of dismissing the elderly as useless is just plain senseless, but rarely do I find reading about it satisfying. But Moon is such a competent and talented writer that every word was a joy to read.

—Lucas Gregor

**The Tranquility Alternative** by Allen Steele  
Ace Books, 301 pages, \$21.95  
ISBN 0-441-00299-4

Allen Steele has shown growth with every new book that he has written. *The Tranquility Alternative* is no exception. One can only wonder how far Steele will take hard science fiction. It's hard for me to review this book as it's one of the best books I've ever read. I have no doubt that Steele will be remembered along side writers such as Heinlein, Asimov, and Clark.

*The Tranquility Alternative* is an alternate history novel about space exploration. It explores an United States that chose to follow through with some of the more ambitious NASA proposals. After reading this, one can only wish that history had turned out to be more like this. The book opens after the United States has sold its lunar base to the Germans. Since there are nuclear bombs on the moon, the United States must send one last mission there to disarm the war heads. What follows is a tense, suspenseful, action-packed tale of intrigue and international politics. If you haven't already encountered Steele's work, this is the perfect time to do so.

—Lucas Gregor

**Expiration Date**, by Tim Powers  
Tor Books, 381 pages, \$23.95  
ISBN 0-312-86086-2

*Expiration Date* is perhaps the best example of magic realism that one can find. It's gritty, heady, witty, gripping, and very well put together. It has a feel unlike anything I've ever read. Tim Powers has a rare gift. In *Expiration Date* the world is full of ghosts and one can extend one's lifetime by catching and absorbing these ghosts. The protagonist Kootie Parganas accidentally inhales the ghost of Thomas Alva Edison. Unfortunately, Kootie is only ten years old and can't digest this powerful ghost. Edison's ghost is so powerful that every sensitive in the city of Los Angeles becomes aware of his presence. Kootie's parents are killed by one of the many people who want to kill Kootie and get the ghost of Edison. Edison's ghost, however, is not particularly interested in letting himself become digested, a singularly horrible experience.

The book comes at you fast paced and never lets up. When I turned the last page it was with complete satisfaction, and a small bit of disappointment—disappointment that the experience was over.

—Lucas Gregor

**The Ganymede Club** by Charles Sheffield  
Tor Books, 352 pages, \$23.95  
ISBN 0-312-85662-8

It's a wonderful time to be a fan of hard science fiction, with both Steele and Sheffield putting out such impressive work at the same time. *The Ganymede Club* is a return to the universe of *Cold as Ice*. This novel takes place immediately following the Great War that killed half of the human race. Lola Berman is a haldane, a therapist that can enter into her patients' dreams. One of her patients comes to her with memories of places that he could never have been during times that he couldn't have been alive. This comes to the attention of the Ganymede Club who fear that this will somehow bring attention to them, and they will do anything to protect the secret of their immortality.

The book develops at a nice steady pace and is completely satisfying. What more can you ask for from a novel?

—Lucas Gregor

## Book Reviews

*Mars Attacks* is a revival of the Topps trading cards which were suppressed in the sixties as being too brutal and graphic. Acornic book, two hardcover books, and a new deck of cards are now available, and there will soon be a major motion picture based on the cards. The budget for the movie is reportedly \$100 million, and it will star Jack Nicholson, Pierce Brosnan, Jimi Brown, Glenn Close, Tom Jones, Martin Short, and Sarah Jessica Parker. The film will be directed by Tim Burton.

*Mars Attacks: Martian Deathtrap* by Nathan Archer  
Del Ray, 243 pages, \$18.00  
ISBN 0-345-40495-5

Before I review this book I should mention that I know Nathan Archer. We met at Shore Leave, a Star Trek con. (I probably shouldn't admit here in this column to having been at Trek con, as the editor, Warren Lapine, is not an ST fan. I once saw him narrowly avoid being lynched by an angry mob of Trekkers after he gave his view on the influence of Star Trek on science fiction literature. He won't do Trek panels anymore.) At any rate, Nathan and I spent a few hours in the bar trying to top one another with stories from our past. We came to the conclusion that neither of us had lived anything like a normal life. *Martian Deathtrap* is completely over the top. We have biker babes, bikini-clad bimbos, obnoxious kids, and bug-eyed Martians. This is a wonderful salute to the pulp era. If you want fast-paced shoot 'em up action that is reminiscent of the pulps, then this is for you. If you want every single scientific "fact" to match up with physics and you're looking for deep meaning in your fiction, this book won't be for you. I did find it to be one hell of a fun romp.

—Lucas Gregor

*Mars Attacks: War Dogs of the Golden Horde* by Ray W. Murrill  
Del Ray, 281 pages, \$18.00  
ISBN 0-345-40496-3

I didn't find *War Dogs* to be as much fun as *Martian Deathtrap*. The dialog of the Mongols was just too stilted for me. Of course, that was one of the things that sometimes turned me off to the pulps. If

dialog such as what follows doesn't turn you off, you'll enjoy the book.

"You treat the Bone Heads like Chinese," Bayar said with admiration.

"I treat them as inferior to Chinese. Are they not Bone Heads?"

"They are truly Bone Heads."

I was also somewhat disappointed by the novel's lack of resolution. It just ground to a halt more or less. Still, I didn't have to force myself to read the book, it kept me engaged.

—Lucas Gregor

*Alien Horizons* by Bob Eggleton  
Paper Tiger, 128 pages  
ISBN 1-85028-337-0

For years Bob Eggleton has been one of the premier artists in science fiction. His artwork has graced the covers of every major magazine in the field, including *Absolute Magnitude* (issue #2). It's no secret that Eggleton is one of science fiction's brightest stars, and *Alien Horizons* only solidifies this position. Virtually every page of this handsome book has a full-color painting on it, with comments about each piece from Eggleton as well as an introduction by Nigel Suckling. The insights revealed by Eggleton are fascinating. I've enjoyed looking through a number of art books in the past, but this is the first one that I've actually enjoyed reading. This book is worth having for either the art or for the text, a rare gem of an art book.

### It Came From the Small Press

This new section is where we will try, as space allows, to review some of the books and magazines that we receive from the small press. Often we will only be able to list the book, subject matter, and an address.

*Palace Corbie* Edited by Wayne Edwards and Helen Homan  
Merrimack Books, 227 pages, \$10.95  
P.O. Box 83514, Lincoln NE 68501-3514

*Palace Corbie* is a very attractive book with high production values throughout. And more importantly the writing holds

up to a higher standard than one usually expects from the small press.

*Prisoners of the Night* Edited by Alayne Gelfand  
Mkashef Enterprises, 90 pages, \$9.95  
P.O. Box 688, Yucca Valley CA 92286-0688

If you really enjoy vampire fiction and poetry you'll want to check this one out.



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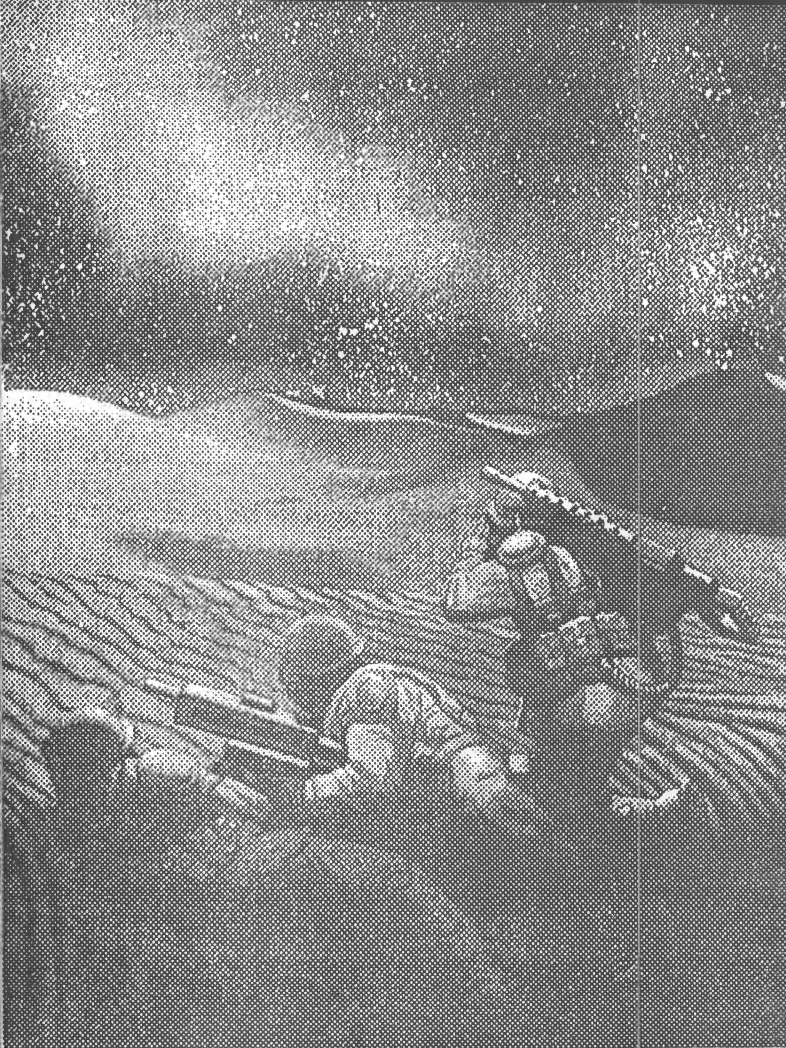
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## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

by Barry B. Longyear

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### HERCULE POIROT, WHERE ARE YOU?

Outside the desert was beginning to give up its heat. Two of the sleds had already been pulled off by their ten-critter teams of lughoxen. I glanced beneath the sled where the deadhead had been counting dimensions, but he wasn't there. When I returned from Nance's sled, Deadeye, Jay, and Bloody Sarah had joined Marantha and Mercy Jane, and all four of them were wriggling beneath their desert sheets putting on their heavy threads against the coming cold. I unbundled my own shirt and parka and put them on under my sheet as I joined them.

I asked Marantha, "Did Sarah tell you about what the Trolls will be doing?"

She nodded as she zipped up her pair of Mihvithian leggings. I wanted a pair of those myself and wondered where she'd gotten hers. Then I remembered the hundred-odd Mihvithian sharks we'd left out in the grit the night before. The Mihvithians had stripped the defunct and departed in order to build up a little inventory for trading purposes before reaching the Razai. I sure did want a pair of those gloves.

"We'll have to keep our eyes open for a magnification lens of some kind," said Marantha. "Unless we're lucky and the shooter's piece has a severe defect in the bore, we probably won't be able to tell enough by eye." She gave a tiny sigh. "Checking slugs'll probably produce more than the stuff I have to work with."

"Nance couldn't think of anyone?"

Marantha laughed which wrinkled up the tiny little freckles on her nose. I still was amazed how a fat little con artist like Herb Ollick had landed this one. Love does strange things to people.

"She could think of a few, Chief. Just for openers, here come all those members of the Hand and of Boss Kegel's gang that are in the Razai? Every one of those sharks lost family or friends when we took them."

I shrugged. "So, what's that? Four, five hundred suspects?"

"Don't stop there. What about all of the sharks from Earth that lost someone in one of the battles? That puts the number up to a couple of thousand, at least. What about the friends or relatives of someone executed in one of our trials? She was in charge. She's the one who appointed you."

I glanced at Jay Ostrow and he was giving me that deadeye look back. "That it?"

"No. Throw in the machos who want her out because she's a woman, and the straights who want her out because she's a lesbian, and the whackos who want her out simply because they're homicidal maniacs on personal power trips, and maybe you'll get the picture."

I rubbed the back of my neck and looked up at her. "I take it motive is not going to be our trail to the shooter."

"Neither is opportunity," said Sarah. "Three thousand sharks on the sand at night, no one keeping track of anyone, a third of them armed, no one really guarding his or her own piece."

"Didn't she mention anyone in particular?"

Marantha pulled her arms in beneath her sheet and began putting on a pair of gloves. "There are some old crowbar beefs she mentioned; stuff from back before the landing." She pulled some papers from beneath her sheet and looked at her notes.

"Jordie Woltz. He was in the Crotch for murder. He's the brother of the rapist that Nance tortured to death. She thinks she saw him in the rear guard." Marantha looked up from her notes. "Nance was down checking the Match's guard when she got hit." She looked back at her papers.

"I have an ex-lover of hers, Dol Cortis, who may or may not be working a grudge. There were a lot of bad feelings when they parted company."

"Who left and who got left?" I asked.

"Nance dumped Dol."

"Why?"

Marantha smiled as her eyebrows went up. "Did you ever meet Dol Cortis?"

I shook my head. "Nope."

"Everything about her that's worth anything is on the outside. Great face and body, and a voice and manner that seem to fill the world with fun. Inside she has the attitude of a wolverine and all of the vulnerability of a cobra." Marantha pulled out a slip of paper and put it at the back of her slim stack.

"There were a few of the sisters who tried to take Nance down back in the crowbars. It was a power thing. Nance thumped them pretty badly. There might be as many as six of them with the column. Their leader was Syl Hagen. There was also Alice Hill. Alice was a snitch, and Nance posted her."

"Posted her? What's that?"

"It's something we used to do to snitches on the women's side." Marantha looked me right in the eyes. "You find a snitch, then you take a big nail with a big wide head and stick it in the snitch's big mouth and nail her cheek to a post in the yard. When you're posted you're hands are tied. When the hammering is over, you're pulled out along the nail until the big flat head of the nail pulls against the inside of the cheek, then a rag is stuffed in your mouth."

Marantha shrugged. "No one can hear you to help you, so there's not much you can do except yank yourself free by tearing open your cheek."

I shook my head. "You bitches got some nasty rules over there."

"Had. What'd you do with snitches on the men's side?"

"Oh, we just pulled a cutter and laid 'em open."

"Very humane."

## Absolute Magnitude

"Enough with the sarcasm." I pointed at her papers. "How long ago was it the snitch got posted?"

"Two years and a little. I checked and Alice is with the left flank guard. She's very pretty, except for a badly scarred cheek." She folded her papers and tucked them in beneath her sheet. "That's about it."

Sarah placed her hand on my arm. "Do you need me for anything?"

I shook my head. "Where you off to now?"

"I'm going to hit all the guards and make sure that the protos are settling in. I'll need to know where you are. I have some scout reports coming in soon."

"Marantha, Deadeye, and me are going back to the rear guard to look up this Jordie Woltz and maybe nose around a little. If you see Stays, let him know. And tell everyone to keep an eye out for Nkurma. He's missing."

There was one more thing, "Sarah?"

"Yes?"

"I didn't want to push Nance about this, but what kind of shape are we in? Can we reach the Sunrise Mountains?"

"How well is the new bunch supplied?"

"A lot better than we were. Their clothes are better designed, and they were issued rations for ten days instead of five. So they still have six days left. Also, they haven't been in any battles."

Sarah nodded. "Sounds good. Stores says that with the water and supplies we captured from the Hand, we're good for another twenty days, and with what the Mihivians are carrying," she raised her eyebrows as she ran a few numbers in her head, "that should give us a little over eight days."

"How far are we from the Big Grass?"

"Ondo told me this morning we're about three days from the grass, and maybe another three days to good water and some edible game. We'll make it if we're careful. The only things we really need to worry about are staying out of fights along the way and what we're going to do once we get there."

"You mean the Hand?"

"There's that, too."

"What else?"

Bloody Sarah nibbled on the inside of her lip. I'd never seen her display evidence of any kind of anxiety before. It put the rattles on me. "The thing I was thinking of is probably our biggest threat."

I folded my arms across my chest. "Which is?"

"Right now we have the desert keeping us together. Once we get off the sand and reach water and vegetation, is the mission to free the Hand's slaves going to be enough to keep us together? I don't think so. You see, we're not an army yet. We're still a collection of raving individualists. Right now the desert makes it so we need each other just to stay alive. So, for awhile at least, we act like a team. Once we get to water, however, I think that'll change. We won't need each other so much then."

I smoked my wig a bit, remembering all that we had gone through. We had paid steep prices for what we were and what we had achieved: the Razai and the *Law*. If it died, if we let it slip away, it just wouldn't be right. Of course, since rightness and fairness had nothing to do with the universe, no one on the sand relied upon them.

"Sarah, maybe sharks know better than anyone else the difference between a mob that rules with a fist and what we got. I think that's why the crowbar rats from Mihvit joined up with us. Here we're the good guys. Maybe the *Law* can keep us together."

She gave a tiny shrug of neither agreement nor disagreement. It just meant that she didn't want to talk about it anymore. She cocked her head toward the east. "I'm heading on up to the point and see if I can find this new colonel you brought me."

Bloody Sarah left as the icy night air closed over us. I turned to Jay Ostrow. "Okay, Deadeye, you stay with me and Marantha. Learn the business. You may inherit someday." I thought, just for the hell of it, I'd feed him a line. "I'm not immortal, you know."

Like lava down a slow hill, a smile spread across his face. "Yeah. I know."

The creep.

I gestured with my head toward the west and the three of us turned and headed on foot for the Rear Guard.

"Bando," called Mercy Jane.

I stopped and looked back. "What?"

"Thanks."

She patted the left pocket of her parka. A slight streak of guilt whipped through me as I thought about what Pili Phil was going to go through without his thumpers. There were things he could do, though. Hit the CSA meetings, see a doctor. Mercy Jane could taper him off. I shrugged and turned away, a dull ache in the back of my neck.

"*Por nada*," I answered, exhausting maybe half of my Spanish vocabulary. I continued toward the Rear Guard with Marantha and Deadeye behind me.

### COPS

The Eyes were out, Blue Moon was just beginning to touch the dunes with its special light, and the column was on the move. The sharks were silent as they hunched into their parkas, kept an eye on the shadows, and concentrated on conserving warmth and putting one foot in front of the other. As the three of us dogged the grit on the way to the rear guard, that dull ache in my neck grew into a class seven headache. My stomach became queasy as I was filled with an overwhelming feeling of dread. The feeling wasn't there so much because of Deadeye Jay as it was the responsibilities of the number two job. To chase away the spooks we kicked around the possibilities about Nance's shooter and then chewed them over again.

Marantha kept asking questions about this suspect or that suspect, then she'd turn the questions and suspects inside out and ask them all over again. I kept trying to answer the questions and every answer I came up with she had either a better answer, a flock of other answers, or an objection. I was beginning to steam my hosties until my brain dropped into gear and I realized that Supercop was only thinking out loud. After that I sort of threw in a grunt now and then and just listened to her think. Once I glanced at Deadeye Jay. He was totally absorbed in what Marantha was saying.

Since I still identified with the fox more than with the hounds, it gave me chills the way Marantha Silver could chew on a fact and worry the damned thing until it either yelped out an answer or died from a broken heart because it couldn't produce for her. When that was done she'd take that worn out old fact, put it together with another tired piece of information and start chewing and worrying all over again. No wonder the Ministry of Justice dropped her in the crowbars when her investigation into top government dirty fingers led her to the First Minister's office.

## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

The FM must've been sweating grenades as Marantha's task force shredded, sorted, plucked out and pieced together a map of the tower of official corruption that made up the front office of the Union of Terran Republics. But there wasn't any room in the MJ for a good cop that year, so the fox that was guarding the chicken coop had her removed.

They tried a hit, but she hit the hitter first. So the FM put money into a few vid networks, lined up the MJ agents, cockroaches, and black rags he had on the pad, appointed a special prosecutor and convicted Marantha Silver of murder. While every crowbar shark in the world knew she was clean, they tossed her into the Crotch. Stays once wondered out loud if the reason the UTR, after forty years of condemning the con dump on Tartaros, finally signed the treaty and joined was just to get Marantha put on infinity hold.

There was something else about the way she worried the facts. She was buried in them, using their impossible puzzles as a place to hide the same way I used rage. The more I listened the more I was convinced she was worried about more than who shot Nance Damas. After we had left the end of the walking column behind and there was just the three of us, I put out my icy cold hand and stopped her.

"Tell me something, Supercop."

"What?"

"What's eating you?"

She burst out with a laugh, her words buttered with anger. "Being here on the grit isn't enough?"

I let go of her arm and placed my hands beneath my armpits. "Sure, that's enough. Enough for me or a thousand other pieces of rat bait I can think of. I don't think it's enough for you, though."

"Maybe."

"You got something on the gnaw. Spill. Maybe I can help."

She was silent for a long time. She sniffed against the cold, or perhaps it was a tear. "It's Herb. I'm worried about him."

"About being killed on the hunt?"

"No. There's no man alive who's better with a knife than Herb. No perp's ever going to get the drop on him. But it's changing him. He's becoming different. He doesn't smile. He doesn't laugh."

"Marantha, doll, killin' g people tends to make you real serious." I glanced at Deadeye. "Jus ask him."

"It scares me, Bando. It's like he's dying inside."

"Hey, you want me to take him off hunting down perps? You got pull in the front office now. I can do it."

I could tell she was wrestling with my offer. Finally she lifted her gloved hand and patted my cheek. "I love you for that, Chief." She lowered her hand. "I'd be doing it more for me than for him. He's a man, not a little boy. I couldn't do that to him."

"Hell, lady, the way Herb thinks about you, there isn't anything you could do down to and including sawing off his left leg that he wouldn't blush, kiss you, and say thanks. The guy worships you. Let me take him off the hunt."

"If he asks to be taken off. Only then, Chief. Promise?"

True love, I thought to myself. One of these days I'm going to have to get someone to sit down and explain it to me. "Sure."

She took my hands in hers and gave them a squeeze. "And keep what I said here between us, okay?" She looked at Deadeye. His face was turned away. "Jay, can you keep it shut?"

Without looking at her he nodded and answered, "Like a tomb."

I nodded and squeezed her hands back. "I won't say anything, on one condition."

"What condition?"

"Tell me where you got the gloves."

I could see her teeth flash a smile. "The Mihvitiens. Some of them were dealing in leggings, gloves, and coats. I traded some fire cubes for them." She rooted in her kit bag for a moment and then held out something. "Here. I got them for Herb. Maybe I can get another pair before he returns."

Deadeye stuck a hand in my face. Gripped in his fingers was a pair of gloves. "Here."

I frowned at him. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. Go ahead."

"If you want 'em back later, just ask."

He turned and looked at me, that smile again on his face. "No need. The shark I took 'em from the last time was dead, too."

A real casket of chuckles. I put on the gloves and nodded at Deadeye. "How long you want to drag this thing out?"

"What thing?"

"About your brother. I'm not a real patient man, so if you're high on mental water tortures and subtle pain, you're wasting your time and mine."

He stared at me for a beat, then glanced away. "All I did was lay a pair of gloves on you. Don't make a thing out of it."

"In that case, thanks."

Marantha lifted an arm and began waving. "Hey! RC! RC! Over here!"

As I winced against the pain in my warming fingers, I turned and looked into the night. In the dim light of the moon I could see a shark wearing a sheet walking toward us. Every now and then there was a moon flash from the star pinned to his chest. "Watson? Is that you?"

"Thought you could use a hand with the cop work." It was Stays. When he was standing next to us, Stays nodded once at Deadeye and looked at me. "Chief, some dust was spotted way south of us by the right flank guard just before sunset."

"Riders?"

"Maybe. Nazzar sent out his Best Ten to scout it out. Also Alna wanted me to tell you she's working for Mercy Jane for the time being, and that she couldn't find Nkuma." He snorted out a little laugh. "There wasn't a loose down or drop of alk in the column that could be had short of murder. Yet I see you found some real good stuff. How'd you get the thumpers, Sherlock?"

I shrugged and looked away. "Nothin' but top flight police work." I looked back at him. "Maybe we ought to send a party out to try and chase down Nkuma."

"Maybe it's time to face that he might be dead."

That ache in my neck along with that sense of dread finally caught me. "Let's go." I turned toward the west and began walking, my gloved hands thrust beneath my armpits from force of habit. With those who'd freeze to death that night, along with the populations of corpses we'd discovered or created since we'd been dumped by the prison ship, it seemed power stupid to be investigating one little attempted murder and worrying about one guilt-ridden mau lost in the dunes. It was like throwing snow flakes into a volcano.

I was afraid of what Nazzar's best ten would find down south. It was riders, it'd be the Hand, or maybe Kegel's. Any one way or another it would mean another decision I would have to make, another responsibility taken on by a chili pepper who'd made a career out of avoiding responsibilities, especially for others.

On the vids I once saw a juggler whose comedy routine was to play someone trying to learn how to juggle. He would try one ball, get the hang of that, then someone would throw him a second ball.

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Once he got used to juggling two balls, he'd call for another. What he was then thrown was an anvil followed in rapid succession by a running chain saw, three lit sticks of dynamite, and a filled goldfish bowl complete with goldfish. That's the way I felt right then. I was just waiting for the goldfish bowl.

"Halt!" screamed a voice that made me jump half out of my sheet.

"Who goes there?"

"Asshole," I cursed.

There was a pause followed by, "Advance, Asshole, and be recognized."

Stays, Marantha, and Deadeye weren't very successful in keeping their snickers quiet.

### GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

The Eyes were high and the moon bright by the time we got back to the rear guard position. It was so cold your piss'd freeze before it hit the grit. Mig Rojas, the yard monster arsonist commanding the tail monkeys, was up to his ears trying to work the new sharks into his organization. He dumped the four of us on a hard case named Leo Carvecci, his second in command.

Carvecci had a nervous habit of dislocating his right thumb and bending it until it touched the back of his wrist. His crowbar handle was Locks and he took us all the way to the rear where the walking part of the rear guard had watch positions set up to cover the rear approaches to the column. On one of those dunes overlooking the way we had come in was Jordie Woltz, brother of the dead rapist whose death, along with the deaths of six witnesses, had earned Nance her reservation in the Crotch. Carvecci went back to the settling in and we got to work.

Jordie Woltz was a haystack, tall and slender with sandy hair and eyes that never seemed to look anyone in the face. When we found him he was squatting just below the crest of a dune studying the western approach to the column. He glanced at Marantha, Stays, Deadeye, and me, then back at the west. "What do you want? I been good." He turned slowly and looked up at me for a second time.

"This is about Nance's shooter, right?"

We gathered around and Marantha began the questions. Jordie's answers seemed straight enough to me, but I wasn't trained to wring the shit out of a tone of voice or an eyebrow twitch like Marantha was. Stays just squatted there, his arms folded across his kneecaps, studying Jordie Woltz. Deadeye just studied me.

"Yeah, I knew that Nance was the one who tortured my brother to death," Woltz began. "I don't hold anything against her on that account. If she hadn't killed the bastard, I would've done him myself. I mean he took that poor woman and raped and murdered her. That was Nance's lover, you know."

"Yeah," I said. "We know."

"I can see why you're looking at me, but like I said, I would've killed the bastard myself. A guy doesn't get to pick his brother, you know."

I scratched my chin and studied him, thinking about all of the times I'd been on the receiving end of a sometimes less than gentle interrogation. I never liked getting thumped, but just then I understood the urge to pound the shit out of a suspect to get some answers you could trust. Marantha came on meek and gentle, which she wasn't. I'd seen her in the fight with the Hand.

"Jordie," she began, "When the shot was fired two nights ago, where were you?"

He grinned. "It's funny talking to cops without a lawyer."

"You think you need a cockroach?" I asked.

"Why?"

"It's like this, sly. If we think you did it we'll try and fry your ass. We don't toss killers back on the street because you didn't get read your rights or had your hand held the right way."

"Man," he said to me as he laughed, "I guess that good cop, bad cop stuff is in the blood, huh?"

"Answer the lady's question, sly."

He shook his head and looked at Marantha. "I can answer your question, sure. That night I was running messages for Mig Rojas. I was up at the left flank guard when the shot was fired. I'd just given a message to Ow Dao. He can back me up on that, because we both looked at each other when we heard the shot. That all?"

"Not quite," answered Marantha. "Who was on watch here when the shot was fired?"

"Down here? I don't know. Like I said, I was up running messages. Ask the Match."

"Did you love your brother?"

I don't know why, but I blushed at the question Marantha asked Jordie Woltz. It was full dark, the Eyes of the Spider clear, cold, and bright, but I could've sworn that Jordie's face was redder than mine.

"I hated him. Just like I told you."

There was a slight pause followed by Marantha asking just loud enough to hear, "You never loved him?"

Jordie shook his head and whispered, "Never."

"Why? It's not normal to hate a brother from birth."

The suspect burst out with a laugh soaked in bitter memories. "I never claimed to come from a normal family." He glanced over his shoulder, indicating a few other sharks who were on watch. "Maybe around here, though, my kind of family was normal."

He has a point there, I was thinking, when Marantha poked the obvious open sore one more time. "Why did you hate him, Jordie?"

"My business," he hissed. "Okay? End of discussion." The tone of his voice was very strained. Jordie Woltz went back to studying the night.

Stays, Marantha, Deadeye, and me looked around at each other for a moment. Marantha nodded at me, we stood, walked around the dune, and back toward the east. "That would seem to wrap up that," Stays remarked.

"Maybe," answered Marantha.

"What, maybe? It's pretty clear Jordie was bunged by his brother and that he hates his brother's guts. That blows the motive. On top of that he's got an airtight alibi."

"Maybe," said Deadeye. "But hating the brother could be an act."

I looked at the hitter, then at Marantha. "What about the alibi?"

"First we have to check it out with General Dao. If he confirms it, then we have to check out if the general is lying."

"Lying? Why would he lie? Unless—"

She nodded. "You've got it. What if Dao wants to be boss? Stays knows him. What about it, Martin?"

Watson thought for a long time before he nodded and answered.

"He was a big time mountain bandit chieftain back in China. Back in the Crotch he bossed one of the strongest gangs in the crowbars. Maybe he still thinks he ought to be number one."

"Hell, I expected to start eliminating suspects. Now we got more than when we started. Where do we go now?"

## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

"We could begin with the message Jordie was supposed to carry to Dao," Marantha answered. "Did it originate with General Rojas, or was the Match responding to a message from Ow Dao?"

Deadeye jumped in, his voice excited. The hitter sounded like the detective business was turning him on. "You mean, if it was a response, Dao could have known Jordie was the runner for the night and sent his message as a setup to give Woltz an alibi?"

"Yes, it could have been prearranged so that they could each give the other an alibi." She paused for a moment. "There's something else."

I felt terribly discouraged. There were simply too many details to sort out and loose ends to nail down. "What else?"

"Jordie is making convincing sounds like someone who was sexually abused."

"That's what I said before Deadeye peed on it by saying it was all an act. I don't get it," I said. "Which side're you on, Supercop?"

She smiled. "I'm on the side of the truth, which means making certain when we take a step there's something besides air and wishful thinking under our feet." She smiled, and I felt not just a little bit patronized by her expression. "Bando, perhaps it is as you say. But what if he did love his brother? Love turns into other things, but it never dies. What if Jordie and his brother were lovers? It's not a rare thing. What if Nance tortured to death Jordie's lover? And there's more."

"More?"

"Yes. What if Jordie did hate his brother, perhaps to the point of obsession?"

I held out my hands again. "Then it's the way I said. He'd be happy to have his brother killed. You heard him say it a couple of times. He said that he would've killed his brother himself."

She nodded and looked at Deadeye with her eyebrows raised. "Yeah," said the rookie. "But what if what he wanted to do was to have out his revenge on his brother himself? Nance might have gyped him out of that, and for only one little rape. Jordie may have been raped hundreds of times."

At that point I was really discouraged. If every suspect had a story that had to be looked at nineteen different ways, I couldn't figure out how we'd ever nail Nance's shooter. Marantha's face, however, was very excited. She looked and sounded like a little kid in the middle of a mountain of Christmas presents. Deadeye looked the same. "You people really get off on this stuff, don't you?"

She shrugged. "I like to hunt." She looked puzzled for a moment.

"What?"

Stays perked up his ears and held up a hand as he whispered, "Listen."

Deadeye turned his head and I strained my ears, but I couldn't hear anything. Marantha pointed up toward Jordie's watch post. We climbed back up the dune.

"Do you hear it?" Marantha asked Jordie. He nodded and pointed toward the northwest.

"There."

I squinted and could see a dull glow against the top of a distant dune. It looked like the reflection from a fire cube. After a bit my ears picked up a dull clatter like a hundreds of rats running across a concrete floor.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"Our listening post out there must have picked it up," said Jordie. "They ought to have a rider in any second." He lowered the aim on his outstretched finger. "There."

First came the sounds of a hoxox panting, then there was a shadow between two dunes. Jordie challenged the rider, and the rider gave the password. He also said something that made me plant my ass on the sand and shake my head.

"It's Nkuma! He's bringing in sharks he's collected from three different landings! He's got over fifty thousand cons with him!"

### THE GHOST RIDER

They came in all that night, joining the column as it moved toward the next dawn. In less than a day the Razai had increased its numbers from three thousand to almost seventy thousand and was strung out over twenty miles of desert. We needed more bodies to take on the Hand, but how do you control a gang of seventy thousand? We'd need more RCs, and what about languages? What about telling the about the Law? Sooner or later the whole thing had to fall apart.

Marantha, Stays, Deadeye, and me went back with the listening post rider to meet Nkuma. By the time we reached him, he was surrounded by Razai and was getting ready to head back into the western desert to gather up more protos. It took a considerable amount of leaning on him before he agreed to sit down and have some rations. His eyes were wide and wild, and his hands shook like an alk twenty hours dry. He sat between Marantha and me, and across the fire cube from him sat a blacker than hell old guy prota named Lomon Paxati. About half a dozen protos squatted in the shadows behind Nkuma.

"Talk to me," I said.

Nkuma finished off three ration bars and half a bottle of water before he stopped trembling. "He hasn't eaten since he met my ship," said the proto. Paxati was as tall as me and was unusually skinny. His eyes were sunken into his head but they were alive with a messiah light. His voice was very deep and his accent was clipped making him sound almost Brit. He wore a lined silver-metallic poncho that doubled as a parka and desert sheet. Beneath his left elbow was his shoulder pack containing his rations and belongings. His bunch had been issued gloves and leggings, too. It kind of made me wonder why the UTR had been so damned cheap with the load from Earth. Maybe they figured we were maggot meat anyway, so why go first class?

After taking another swallow of water, Nkuma nodded toward Paxati. "All black. All of the prisoners on that ship. All black."

I looked again at Lomon Paxati. He had long delicate fingers and the air of a bank clerk. He just didn't vibrate like a shark. "What're your bones, man?" I asked.

Paxati's eyebrows went up. He smiled and held out his hands. "Calcium, I suppose."

There were a few chuckles from the shadows, and from Nkuma. He shook his head. "No, Lomon. Bando wants to know what you did."

"Did?"

Nkuma nodded. "Sure. Tell him what you did to get sent to Tartaros. What're you guilty of, man?"

Lomon Paxati gave a sheepish smile and shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm guilty of being elected president of the duly constituted government of the Planet Kvasir."

I looked back at Nkuma. He was rubbing his arms against the cold and slowly shaking his head as he looked into the dull orange glow of the fire cube. "Man, they solved their race problem on Kvasir all right. The blacks they didn't!": they packed off to

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Tartaros. Men, women, children, everyone."

Great, I thought. Just what we need. More children and a shipload of straightmeats.

Nkuma glanced at me. "I guess you want to know what I've been doing."

"There was a point back there when I was going to put a crease between your horns for leaving me with the only shooter in the middle of sixteen thousand angry sharks."

"I know you said not to chase them down, that they were too far away, but I just couldn't leave them to the desert. Not after what the fools who followed me toward the mirage went through." He moistened his lips and looked back at the fire cube. "I almost didn't make it to the first ship. That was Lomon's."

His eyes grew haunted and his voice fell to a whisper. "Bando, it was like when we met the sharks from Mihviht, except the blacks from Kvasir were already divided up into gangs and were busy killing each other. They're straightmeats, too. No sharks." He looked me in the eyes. "I had to conduct three trials. I executed five men and a woman. The woman was the mother of three children. All three of them watched me drill their mama."

"You keep any kind of record?"

Nkuma nodded toward Lomon. "He's my clerk. Don't worry, he's not a cockroach, he's a philosophy professor."

I scratched my head. "That might be worse."

The president laughed, and it seemed genuine. Maybe he'd be okay.

Nkuma looked up at the belly of the Spider. "Who knows how many ships they have dumping cons here? No one, I guess. I must've seen twenty exhaust trails the last couple of days." He looked down at the fire cube, now burned down to an orange point of light.

"Once I'd explained about the Forever Sand, the mirage, and about the Razai, I started off toward the signal flares you had Stays sent up at night. We'd only marched for a few hours when another ship put down just north of us, close." He indicated Lomon Paxati and the few who were standing in the shadows.

"A couple of these birds volunteered to go with me to meet the new ship. The second ship was from Earth. They were the twenty-sixth load back home."

Our bunch had been the first load. I nodded as I silently congratulated the bottom line boys in the Ministry of Justice. The crowbar hotels must finally be putting out the vacancy signs. There was something else to think about. What had happened to those twenty-four other loads of convict-exiles from Earth? Maybe four hundred thousand men and women. The chances were that the ones who were still alive were struggling to reach the Green Mountain Mirage before their water ran out. That didn't even count the cons being dumped by other planets. I think it was just getting through to me how close we had come to death, and how the special nature of the Razai was what had been keeping us in the running.

"They hadn't been on the sand three hours when we got to them," Nkuma continued. "Two murders there. Two more trials. Two more executions."

"What about the third ship?" asked Marantha.

Again Nkuma moistened his lips. He wrapped his arms around his middle and bent over as Marantha struck another fire cube. "The third ship contained the entire population of the Cumaris Institute for the Criminally Insane."

It was as though an ice cold eel slithered down my spine. "You didn't tell them about us, did you?"

Nkuma looked at me for a bit. Then he reached beneath his sheet and pulled out his copy of the *Law of the Razai*. He held the papers out toward me. "I did what it says in here. The past is done past and they could join the Razai or do the desert on their own. Most of them joined."

"I can't believe it," I said. "Don't we have enough rubber hotel meat of our own? Did you have to bring in the whole Tiltin' Hilton? How many of them?"

"It was a standard pit ship. Sixteen, seventeen, thousand." Nkuma let the hand holding the papers fall to his lap. He sat there staring at them. "It's the law. What happened before the landing is done past. Everyone is free to join whatever leader he or she wants. Besides," he said as he looked up at me, "that was the only ship we met out there where I didn't have to kill somebody to get their attention."

I rubbed my eyes as I thought. Maybe the shadow talkers from Cumaris were crazy enough to believe in what's happening on Tartaros without being shown. I glanced at my fellow RCs. For the first time Deadeye's cool menacing smugs were gone. He looked worried. So did Marantha. We'd never had a not guilty by reason of insanity plea. I didn't think I'd know what to do with one if it landed on me. Stays grinned and held out his hands. "This is Tartaros, Chief. Things're different here, including the rules and definitions."

Marantha nodded. "Who knows what the definition of insane is, or even if the *Law* has to define it."

Deadeye frowned and shifted into deep thought. I let out an involuntary sigh and looked at Nkuma. "I don't know, man. This is an awful lot to chew."

Nkuma gave me a malicious grin. "We saw two more ships put down close enough on the way in. I sent four new RCs out to meet each one."

"You made new cops?"

"We needed more. I was the only RC in sight." He leaned forward a bit, his face anxious. "I want to go back out there, Bando. That's what I want to do: greet the protos when they come in. We need the bodies to fight the Hand, and doing this'll help heal me a bit."

"Man," I said, "You got your legs wrapped around a ten ton ghost and you're riding it for glory."

He stared at me with hooded brown eyes. At last he said, "What's your point?"

"No point." I thought back to the bus ride from the prison to the spacecraft. I had been sitting near the window and Nkuma was next to me on the aisle. Across from him had been the ex-prisoner we all called Fodder, who was being ridden by a few ghosts of his own. Nkuma had been amusing himself by tormenting the guilt-ridden man.

"*There ain't no way 'round the red suit*," he had said to Fodder. Nkuma had touched a finger against his knee. "Sssssss!" He lifted his finger and blew upon it. "*Hot! Hot!*" Then he had laughed at Fodder.

Maybe Nkuma thought he had found a way around the red suit. Anyway, we needed the additional bodies. I got to my feet as a thought occurred to me.

"What is it, Chief?" asked Marantha.

"Signal flares. We stopped firing them once the bunch from Mihviht came in. I've got to get someone back on the gun to help steer in all these new groups." I looked down at Nkuma. "Okay, man. You get to drive the welcome wagon. Work out some way to keep in contact with all of your groups and with me, and make sure

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your copies of the *Law* are up to date. Bring some Razai with you. It's too much to do by yourself. I'll try and get some water to you."

Nkuma cocked his head back toward the shadows. "Come up into the light." A small crowd of sharks stood and moved in close. He looked at me. "I'm bringing these guys. There are a couple from each ship, and a couple of Razai wanted to go, too. And I have my clerk."

I shook my head. "I'm keeping your clerk. Appoint another one." I raised my head and looked at the new squad of RCs that would be running the welcome wagon. Big Dom was one of the Razai that had volunteered to stick with Nkuma. He had followed Nkuma to the mirage and back, and there must have been something the yard monster saw in Nkuma that he liked.

"You all got copies of the *Law*?" They nodded and muttered in the affirmative, and one more class graduated the Razai Police Academy.

At the end of the line was a Razai shark wearing one of the Kegel Gang sheets. He had a rifle, which was good. Facing an angry mob of sharks with only one rifle was not the key to crowbar serenity. I studied the guy's face. He was a haystack with graying hair and a haunted expression of his own. It wasn't until we had left Nkuma and his bunch behind and were halfway back to the walking column that I remembered who it was: Fodder, the priest on the prison bus who was all frocked up.

As we walked I spent a moment pondering how the sharks I knew had morphed out, become something different. Killers were mutating into sources of wisdom, terrorists were getting into social work, sex perverts and the burnt brain set were becoming responsible, and it wasn't just Tartaros. There were plenty gangs on Tartaros made up of the usual assortment of losers and bone grinders who hadn't changed a bit. But the Razai was different. I asked myself why, thinking that if I could answer that question I'd have a valuable piece of truth in my grasp. Was it because of the *Law*? Before I could explore the question or the answer there was a shout from up ahead. A mounted shark came rolloping between the dunes shouting my name.

"Nicos! Bando Nicos!"

We all called him down. He pulled up his steam snorting lughox in front of us and dismounted. It was Slicker Toan, partners with Minnie McDavies in the walking column RCs. It never failed to stun me how big, clumsy, and stupid Slicker looked. A trim cover for a nimble-fingered brain.

"Slicker, what is it?"

His answer tied the pink ribbon on the end of my thirteenth day on Tartaros.

"Bando, Nazzar's best ten just reported Kegel's Gang riding up from the south! They're armed, there must be twenty-five, thirty thousand of them, and they're looking for us!"

We went back and got Mig Rojas to cut loose four critters for us, we mounted up, and Slicker led us toward the east.

### THE DARKNESS TIME

We troloped toward the walking column until we had to rest the critters. While they puffed and we walked, my brain cooked. There were just too many things in my face at the same time. It was like the snowball from Hell doubling in size every few turns as it lurched down the side of an erupting volcano on a crumbling ridge separating a river of molten lava from a smoking bottomless pit. We

were seventy thousand sharks with another thirty thousand or more on the way, and I couldn't even imagine seventy thousand, much less think in terms of leading them in to tangle with Boss Kegel's army. I was already juggling the anvil. I figured it wouldn't be long before some chup tossed me the lit sticks of dynamite.

Since it was thirty thousand armed and mounted Kegeleros coming at us against our twelve or thirteen hundred rifles, there wasn't much point in thinking about trading taps with our neighbors from the south. Among our options, a high speed stroll in the opposite direction seemed smart, but I was no general. For all that mattered, I was no boss or cop, either.

Just to put hair on the bear, only three thousand out of our seventy thousand sharks had any idea why the Razai was what it was, or had any reason to fight Kegel. The rest of them didn't know any more than a sand bat about what they'd be fighting for. They'd had the *Law* read to them, and some of them had seen Bad Blue Bando in action as he dropped the lead on pretty little Tani Adulo, but they didn't know what the alternative was. The alternative was slavery, if you were lucky. If you were female, however, or male and pretty, nightmares would become a welcome relief from reality under the bosses.

Tartaros without the *Law* was crawling on your face and either killing or begging for every scrap of food. It was bending over or spreading your legs to anyone with power. Under the bosses the fist, the cutter, and the gun was power. Tartaros without the *Law* was that forest of skeletons back there on the sand, along with the hundreds and thousands of other ship loads of corpses whose blood had been soaked up by the desert.

The *Law* of the Razai put the power in the hands of the people. The grunt squat yard shark had the right to life and he had the right to vote on who protected that right. Pussyface Garoit, our first boss, did that. Because he did that the Razai was the diamond in the coal bin. The *Law* didn't protect territory, money, cockroach fees, or power; it protected us. It was funny to think that when Pussyface died he thought his whole life had been a total waste. Considering our cards, maybe Pussyface had died in a turd shirt. Caught between the half-million soldiers of the Hand and the Kegeleros it didn't look like the Razai had many rides left on its ticket.

In the dark Stays and Marantha were chewing over what we had on the Nance Damas shooting, and I could hear tiny scrapes and clicks as they took apart their weapons and cleaned them, another chance to do so not being guaranteed. I couldn't concentrate on the talk, but cleaning my piece was something I could do. I broke down the rifle, a little surprised at how quickly we had mastered the art of stripping and cleaning a rifle in the dark with no instruction. As I cleaned the piece, the physical activity put my head to rest for a couple of minutes. Soon, however, I was done and back in my own head, lost behind enemy lines.

Lomon Paxati was questioning Slicker about life on the big beach, and I owned up to myself why I had nabbed him from Nkuma. I didn't want to be boss. Worse than that, I had no business in the job. Hell, almost anyone in the old Razai would've jumped at the chance to be power one. A number of them had been bosses back in the crowbars. The only reason I could think of for Nance sticking me in the slot was that I didn't want it and would dump it back in her lap at the first opportunity. Of course that was exactly why I had no business being in the position in the first place.

I had grabbed Paxati because I was a thief, murderer, and crowbar shark. He was a genuine elected president of a world population. He

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had to have a better idea than me about what to do and how to run things. I didn't tell him about it because there was something about him that bothered me. Until I knew what it was I wasn't going to be handing out any jobs.

Where do you go for the strength you don't have? The heebers, rag heads, and Jesus jammers all had answers to that, but Bando Nicos slithered his own path through the swamp. I reached to my kit bag and traced the outline of Big Dave's copy of Southey's *Life of Nelson* with my fingertips. I thought of the old sailor's defeat in the gun boat battle with the French at the port of Boulogne. His ass kicked, a good friend in the maggots trough, Nelson quit the navy. He was in darkness time, he resigned, and went to live in a place called Merton in Surrey.

He was finished, fed up, and farked. Right then I knew how he'd felt. What I wanted at that moment was to dump it all and be done with it. Maybe my Merton in Surrey would be hot and a little too sandy, but to be out from under all of that responsibility would be all the home I'd ever want.

There was a big difference between Nelson and me, though. He quit only after he got his ass kicked. I was made smart on the street and in the yard. I wanted to quit *before* my ass got kicked. There was another difference, too. When his country needed him he came back. I figured if I ever did take a stroll, I'd never have the guts to come back. But what can you do about it when thousands might die because of a stupid mistake you might make? Hell, what can you do about it if, making no mistakes, thousands might die?

There was something else I remembered. Long before Nelson was a great hero and admiral, he was a young midshipman flattened and crippled by one more illness, failed in his duties and career because his health had failed him. His future was piss on a dog's hind leg and he was thinking of suicide.

The critters were rested and we stopped and mounted up. When we were moving again I scrounged a fire cube from Stays, struck and fixed it on my green stick, and looked through my *Nelson* until I found the admiral's own words. As I read them I was filled with how I had felt that first night in Greenville.

"I felt impressed with a feeling that I should never rise in my profession. My mind was staggered with a view of the difficulties I had to surmount, and the little interest I possessed. I could discover no means of reaching the object of my ambition. After a long and gloomy reverie, in which I almost wished myself overboard, a sudden glow of patriotism was kindled within me and presented my king and country as my patron. 'Well, then,' I exclaimed 'I will be a hero and, confiding in Providence, I will brave every danger!'"

I knocked the fire cube to the sand and put the book back in my kit bag as I smoked my skull. Half the time that passage sounded like some of the spiritual awakening stories I'd heard at CSA meetings. Other times Nelson's thinking might as well've come out of the head of some kind of swamp critter from outer space.

I had been in the deep funk like the midshipman those first days in the Crotch. When Nelson used to talk about that desperate moment in his life, he used to say that from that time a radiant orb was suspended in his mind's eye, urging him on to renown.

I looked over my shoulder at Blue Moon and spat at the sand in honor of the only radiant orb that was suspended in my mind's eye. Still, back in the Crotch, I had felt one of those radiant orbs in my heart after reading about the midshipman. It had been a feeling of hope. The shit never goes on forever. This too shall pass. I sighed as I realized the old Earth platitudes just didn't work on the sand.

Tartaros was infinity hold and infinity hold does go on forever, or at least as much of forever as I'd ever see.

As we entered the limits of the old walking column camp, Stays asked and Paxati gave us the full story about the Kvasir maus. It seemed the majority on Kvasir was made up of haystacks, and the salt 'n pepper thing had been getting out of hand for some time. So the haystack cockroaches passed a few quick laws, redefined justice, and started rounding up the maus and sticking them in what they called resident areas. Sharks still call them concentration camps.

All of the maus, of course, were bent. What thumped Kvasir in the gyros, though, was the heap of haystacks who were angry at the government, as well. In their haste to throw all the maus into resident areas, the anti-mau haystacks neglected to change the laws concerning who is eligible to become president. So the maus and the opposition haystacks jumped into the sack and elected Lomon Paxati president of the world government of Kvasir. In addition, he was backed up by a congress with a narrow pro-mau majority. Things were looking up for a whole millisecond.

Unfortunately, while possessing a majority of the votes, the salt 'n pepper coalition did not possess a majority of the guns. Funny how things like that work out. The army and the national police held their own election, arrests were made, and those maus who weren't killed found themselves on a rocket ride to infinity hold. Although there were lots of gramps and urches in the load, most of the maus had been doing dukes for the revolution. They were angry and looking for someone to take it out on.

Stays had an observation. "Sherlock," he said to me, "With this bunch and the shipload of shadow talkers from Cumaris, it looks like more than sharks are getting dumped here."

"Your vision encompasses universes, swani."

"What I mean, chup, is that the council that decides who gets dropped on Tartaros isn't on the up and up."

"Write your representative." I pulled up my critter and looked at Stays. "We're not exactly in a position to file any charges, if you know what I mean. Anyway, what do I care who in the Tartaran Administrative Council lines his pockets. All that's done past."

"I wasn't thinking of that."

"Then what?"

"The rifles. You've always wondered how they got here. So's everyone else. No one on the planet has the tools necessary to make them, and no one knows what the propellant in the ammo is made of. What if the rifles and blue goo come from outside? Off planet?"

I patted my critter's neck and frowned as I looked up at the Eyes of the Spider. Escape. That's what it meant. One slim chance to haul it off that rock. "They'd have to get here somehow. Ships." I faced Stays. "You think Quana Lido's gang has an in with TAC?"

"That's where everybody goes to get the blue goo. If she doesn't have an in with the council she's at least tight with the gun runners who do have an in with TAC."

I nodded as I looked back at Blue Moon, now low and greenish on the horizon. My wig was smoking as I tried to add the lit dynamite to my juggling act. "Possibilities Possibilities."

"Speaking of guns," interrupted Deaceye from behind me, "shouldn't I have one? I might have to do some cop stuff someday."

I turned on the back of my critter and looked at the shadow riding on the critter behind me. Every now and then I put the death angel on my shoulder and pinch her ass. Maybe it's my way of tempting the powers out there. Here's a great chance to wipe Bando Nicos, the gesture would say. Do it and end the hoax. It would say. But, after

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loading the cannon, lighting the fuse, and sticking my head in the muzzle, if I was still alive the next day, what was the message? Did God love me or was it he hadn't quite finished running me through his bag of gags? More head smoke.

"Yeah, Deadeye. You need a piece." I tossed him mine. He caught it and gave me a look. Maybe that was the only point of wearing a death angel: just to see that look on somebody's face when you do something so stupid they suspect that they've misread the cards. They begin to wonder if they're the one's that's stupid instead of you. It's a way to kill the clock.

### THE VOLUNTEER

Blue Moon and the Eyes were gone as we reached the tail end of yesterday's walking column camp. Behind us there was a disturbance and we all turned on the backs of our critters to see what it was. It was a rider, someone who obviously didn't care how much noise he or she made. The rider was hollering my name and raising one primo clatter. Since it might've been a messenger from Rojas, we pulled up and waited. The rider's critter came to a halt and the figure on the critter's back moved in the shadows.

"You're Bando Nicos?"

"I'm Nicos."

"May I have a word?" It was a woman's voice, strong and all business.

Stays lit a cube and tossed it on the sand between us. The person was a pale mau, very slender, and she carried a pack on her back. More packs were strapped across the critter's shoulders in front of her legs. The hood on her silvered Kvasiri weather cape was thrown back revealing a face that came from a dream.

"Who're you?" I asked. I looked at Paxati but the President only shook his head. I went back to looking at the rider, which was okay because she was easy on the orbs.

Very white teeth grinned in the darkness. "My name is Jontine Ru. I'm a reporter."

I started laughing. "Or what? Grit Publications?"

The smile faded. "Mihviht World Vidwatch."

That was an ever sillier answer than mine. "You're a real reporter? I mean, you're on the job?"

"That's right."

I laughed as I shook my head in absolute wonder. "You telling me you volunteered for this place?"

She hesitated and shrugged. "In a manner of speaking."

I glanced up at the belly of the Spider. The big bug's eyes were over the horizon and it seemed to be laughing at everything. I lowered my gaze until it landed on the reporter. Maybe she was a caress on the orbs but she was a bent on the struts. I had other problems; too many of them to sit and drool over impossible fantasies.

"So what can I do for you, Jontine Ru?" There were a couple of giggles at the unintentional poem.

"I'd like to tag along for a few days. I'm doing a piece on Tartaros and—"

"You mean like you're a reporter for real?" I interrupted.

"Yes."

I dismounted, walked over, and stood up close to her. She was very pretty and slender. She looked more like an actress than a crowbar bitch with a five ton ass to swing. I was astounded that she

hadn't been eaten alive. "Are you out of your mind, lady? How did you get here? Why wasn't your candle snuffed yards ago?"

"I followed a story. That's all."

"No, that's not all."

"Very well. When I was covering the elections on Kvasir, the roundup began and I sort of took the place of one of the exiles."

"Sort of?"

"Yes."

I scratched my beard, rubbed my neck, and shook my head in sheer wonder. "Jontine Ru, you may have caused the universe to entirely revise the concept of asshole."

Her words came out steam pressed. "From what I can determine, Nicos, twenty or thirty million exiles have perished on this damned desert. Perhaps even double or triple that number. Don't you want the bastards you sent you here to know what's going on?"

I climbed back up on my critter and settled down on its broad, hairy back as I thought. There were a lot of causes out there carrying signs, but the Free Bando Nicos Movement never had gotten off the ground. In fact, it was Bando Nicos who'd gotten off the ground. What with all of the new ships coming in, getting ready to face the Hand, trying to stay alive against the Forever Sand and Boss Kegel's thirty thousand rifles, the back home public's right to know really wasn't one of my peak priorities. In fact it was somewhere below the ingrown toenail on my left foot that was beginning to give me trouble because of all the walking in sox stiff with sweat and sand. Did I care if Saul and Sally Straightmeat heard the truth about Tartaros so they could go tch, tch, tch over their morning coffee? Pull a short and curly and wake up, sly.

"Look, Flash, I got no time to make TV shows." I pointed at her pack. "You really got a vid recorder in there?"

She held up her hand, and in her palm was a tiny black box a little smaller than a pack of nails. "This is my camera. In the packs I have editing equipment and about four hundred hours worth of high density microdiscs to fill."

Stays chuckled and said, "You must be planning on staying a long time."

"I believe we all are," said Deadeye. What do you know. The hither made a joke.

"It's a big story," she responded. Looking at me, she asked "Do I get to tag along?"

Marantha stepped up to Jontine and asked, "What about getting your discs off planet? Do you have some kind of arrangement?"

That perked up my ears. If her company had gotten her on the planet, they must've figured out a way to get her off. That was what I figured until I saw the expression on Jontine's face. "No. We didn't work out anything like that. This was a last second thing." There was something about her expression that seemed guilty, defensive. "We couldn't quite work out the details. I'm on my own."

Deadeye chuckled and shook his head. "What you mean is you were covering another story on Kvasir and got caught up in the mau sweep."

If looks could kill, Deadeye Jay would have been doing contract hits in Heaven for ambitious angels. Jontine moved her gaze from Deadeye to me. "Yes."

"Perfecto," I muttered.

She nodded her head toward me. "The conversation I overheard back in the rear guard made it clear to me that someone probably has contact with Tartaros on a regular basis. That's where the guns and

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ammo come from. I'm a professional at finding out things like that. How about it, Nicos?"

"Are you talking Quana Lido's gang?"

"That's right."

"From all we've heard, Boss Lido's territory is a long way from here. Even further south than Kegel. We're going east. For all I know, it might be years before we make any kind of contact with Lido."

"One way or the other, I'll get the story out. How about it? From what I've seen and heard so far, there's at least a few things you people might want to tell the governments who dumped you here."

"What can you tell a cockroach?" asked Slicker.

While the others picked at her with questions and made fun of her, I chewed her request. Actually, it was no big deal. As long as she slung her share of the shit, I didn't care what she did on her own time. I really couldn't think of a single objection except that I look upon reporters as not much higher on the social scale than cockroaches. I've had words stuck in my mouth more than once by one of those plastic-headed, microdrilled vidstars that do their editing with a narrow turd. And right after he turns a purse snatching into a mass murder to boost ratings, the next thing you see is the same clown holding forth on some commentary about journalistic objectivity. They made my hemorrhoids throb.

There seemed to be something different about Jontine Ru, however. It wasn't just that she was in the same shithole with the rest of us. It was something else. It was an intensity, an energy, about her. Something in me wanted to trust her, and that was the thing that I mistrusted the most. What to do?

In my pack I had Big Dave's copy of the life of Lord Nelson. Inside the book was my copy of the *Law*. The *Law* had all the answers. What to do with Jontine Ru was Freedom Rule, number two. She was allowed to go wherever she wanted.

"Okay. You can come along until I say different." Right then I felt a real uneasiness about my decision. "Just don't turn your little viddie cam on me unless I know about it. Okay?"

Her eyebrows went up. "Why?"

"Because I asked you, that's why. I don't want to be worried about you getting shots of me while I'm pulling up my drawers or shaking off out in the dunes."

She laughed again and nodded. "Very well. No nudity." They all laughed, except me and Slicker. I figure we were both thinking about Kegel and his thirty thousand rifles. Slicker mounted up and began heading east. We all mounted up and followed him while Marantha instructed Show Biz how to quiet down all her packs of junk. Soon we were all riding in silence. As we rode I buried myself inside my parka hood and desert sheet against the cold, cursing the silence. Every time the noise level outside went down enough, the noise from inside began taking over.

### TRUST, DEATH, LOVE, AND BUSTERS

We had just reached the front end of the old walking column camp and Nance's sled was still beneath its camouflage sheet. There was another sled containing supplies, and surrounding them both was a small force of fifty or so armed sharks. The few who were left behind were beating their gums about Boss Kegel's column of rifles. On the steps going into the rear of Nance's sled stood Mercy Jane talking to a man wearing one of the Mihvitiian desert sheets.

I climbed down from my critter and walked over to the stairs. "Why didn't this crate move off with the rest of the walking column?" I demanded.

Mercy Jane looked at us for a moment, then came down the steps and stood on the sand in front of me. "She still can't be moved."

"Why? I mean, I thought she was getting better."

"If she's moved, it could permanently damage her spinal cord. It might even kill her. We're going to have to operate again, and much sooner than I had expected."

I looked up at the Mihvitiian shark who had been passing the time of day with her. "Why are you here, yard eagle?"

The man was craggy faced with dark hair turning to gray. He looked like a retired sea captain, someone who ought to be sitting on a dock someplace whittling trees into toothpicks.

"I heard about the Iron Lady's injury, and offered my assistance to Dr. Sheene. My name is Wolfgang Toffel. I am a neurosurgeon."

Dim memory itched at the back of my head. What finally shook it loose was when Jontine Ru said, "The Bordentown Ghoul."

"Oh, yes," I muttered as little electric itches ran up my spine. I studied him all over again and he no longer looked like a fatherly type who ought to be whittling toothpicks. He used to do other things with knives. Basically he looked like someone who ought to have a wooden stake driven through his heart.

It had been a bunch of years ago. The stains and black rags had nailed him on Mihviti, but the Wolf had earned his rep on Earth. It had been part of Bordentown Rehab fifteen years or more ago. He had been part of the rehab staff and had conducted a considerable number of unauthorized experiments on the inmates. One inmate had died, and two or three more wound up drooling in their diapers and discussing the meaning of life with the jellyfish.

"I remember you, Wolf. I'm surprised you're still alive."

"Why is that?"

"After what you did to the sharks at Bordentown? I figured the yard monsters would've eaten you alive by now. Maybe the grapevine doesn't reach to Mihviti."

"It reaches." The man studied me for a moment and smirked. "I thought what had happened before the landing was done past."

At that moment I thought that I just might thin the bastard myself. But that would have to wait. Too many things were coming down. I turned to Mercy Jane.

"Do you know the story about this clown?"

She nodded. "And he knows mine. Whatever else you think about him, understand this. He is a skilled neurosurgeon, which I am not. I trust him, which is all you need to know." She held out her hand. "I need your ice pick."

I took a step back. "Like, hell."

"I need your ice pick and at least five more if you can find them. The cutters we have are too crude for the work we need to do. Wolfgang needs some delicate tools made, and the Trolls said they could make them, except that it would take a lot less time if they could start with ice picks."

I pointed at the door of the sled. "Is she awake? I have to talk to her."

"Don't take too long. She's had half a turnper, and I want her to stay quiet."

I climbed the stairs, pushed the Wolf aside, and entered the compartment. There was a fire cube burning in a holder mounted above her head, and it made her look like a stiff stretched out at a wake.

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"Nance?"

Without opening her eyes she answered. "Bando, what were you bellyaching about out there?"

I sat down next to her bed. "Nance, you got to appoint somebody else number two. G-d, now I know how the number two came to mean shit. Look, I just can't handle everything that's happening. Nkuma's brought in another fifty thousand sharks, and he's going out to get more."

Nance nodded. "Good. We need more fighters. Is he running on his own, or did you okay it?"

"I okayed it, but—"

"You did good, then. So, what else're you worried about?"

"Well, for one thing, Kegel!" Remembering that Nance was very sick, I tried to calm down. In a quieter voice I said, "Lady, we are in a corner! Hasn't anybody told you about Kegel?"

"I heard." Her hand reached out and gently enclosed mine. She had the strength to turn my fingers into apoplexy if she wanted. "Bando, I want you to push all your stupid macho bullshit out of the way and listen real hard to what I'm going to tell you."

I sat up. "I don't do that stuff."

She smiled. "That's right, you're all better now." The smile faded under the force of the thumper Jane had given her. "I'll tell you something, Bando. There's only two ingredients you need to make a macho muffin: fear and bullshit. Right now you are full of both. You going to listen?"

"*Sí, Mamacita*."

It was deadly quiet for a few seconds, almost as though Nance had forgotten how to breathe. Her eyelids fluttered and she inhaled. "Those were some power drops you handed Mercy Jane. The world is spinning." She moistened her lips and turned her eyes toward me. "Bando, you can't do it all by yourself. I know the brown sugar. I grew up surrounded by it. I know you think to be a man you should be able to run everything by yourself. That isn't so. It's not even smart. You have to rely on your people. Understand?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"You can't do it alone. You try and do it all by yourself and you'll fall apart. You'll crack, stare at walls that aren't there, or start chopping up people in the shadows. If you don't want to go crazy, you have to spread the job around."

"Like what?"

"Like how I relied on you to settle things when Jobo Ramis and Kid Scorpion began waving blades at each other. I didn't look over your shoulder or tell you how to do it. I relied on you to take care of it."

I shook my head. "You mean trust? I got to trust them?"

"That's right. If you can't trust them, get someone you can trust." She squeezed my fingers.

"I don't get it, then, Nance. If Stays is running the cops, Bloody Sarah the army, the Troils are fixing guns, and Mercy Jane is fixing you, what's my job? What am I supposed to be doing out there?"

"Be there. Your most important job is to be there. Be calm, and be strong. Your second most important job is appoint good people and get rid of the assholes. Another thing."

I rubbed my eyes and tried to ease the tension in my neck.

"What's that?"

"Remember that first morning? Remember that fight with Kegel's scavengers? We didn't have any weapons at all, and the scavenger patrol had five hundred rifles."

I nodded. "Yeah. I remember. I remember we left six hundred friends and enemies on the desert for the sand bats."

"Just so you understand, Bando. Just so you understand." Her voice had faded to a whisper.

"Just so I understand what?"

Her eyes opened to dark slits. "People are going to die. If the Razai is going to live, people are going to die."

"And I'm the one who has to tell them to kill and die?"

"Yes." She released my hand and pointed at the door. "Get going. We'll catch up when we can."

I wanted to ask her about Lomon Paxati, the former president of Kvasir. Wouldn't he make a great administrator? In fact, wouldn't he make a great replacement for Bando Nicos? The answers were there, if I wanted to look at them. One of the sharks I was going to have to learn to trust was Bando Nicos. Maybe someday Lomon Paxati would make a great administrator, but right then he didn't seem to know squat about being a shark, much less a shark in the Razai. But maybe he could learn. Maybe I could haul him around until he could learn. As I stood in the doorway I glanced at Wolf Toffel, the Bortentown Ghoul.

"Wolf," I said to him, "I was out of line. What's past is past, and that applies to everyone." As I pulled out my ice pick and handed it to him, I saw Alna approaching the sled with a double armload of bandages and stuff. Her breath rose in clouds above her head.

For a second I wanted to pull her out of the nursing business and keep her with me to prop up my liquid ego. But she had a job and was needed. Besides, the sooner she and the docs made Nance better, the sooner Bando Nicos was off and away enjoying the carefree life of a Razai Cop. Besides, I felt safer with her in the back with Mercy Jane, away from the fighting.

"Bando," she called when she spotted me. I stepped down from the sled and gave her a peck on the cheek.

"You think that's a kiss, chili pepper?" she asked as she laughed. "C'mon, down an' brown. Shake off those ice cubes, stir up that brown sugar, and give me a plant."

I gave her one and just about squished the supplies she was carrying. Still holding her, I whispered, "How's that?"

"The nights get awful long without you, Bando." Her warm lips on my ear were stirring up the brown sugar plenty, and I held her out at arm's length.

"I got to get up to the point. There's a lead storm coming this way. Take care of Nance." I took off my right glove and placed it on her cheek. "Stay safe."

She turned her head, kissed my palm, and looked up at me. I wanted to dive into her huge brown eyes and lose myself forever. "Bando, do you love me?"

It was right of her to ask. I mean, love was a hard thing for me to understand; a harder thing to feel. I nodded, and she said "Say it."

I glared around at the President, Marantha, Stays, Slicker, Show Biz, and Deadeye until they moved away. I looked down at Alna. She was still holding all that stuff, so I took it from her and handed it to Mercy Jane. When I returned to Alna, I took her by the waist and kissed her. For a moment she was limp, then she came alive and wrapped her arms around my neck. I touched my lips to her ear as I whispered, "Yes. Yes, I love you. You are the only thing in the world that I do love. Be here when I get back."

Her breath warmed my ear as she whispered back at me, "Remember the stars, Bando? Remember the Eyes of the Spider?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember when you look at the Eyes of the Spider, I can see them too. That way we won't lose each other."

I don't know. Maybe I was getting used to the smell of the unwashed. I buried my face in her neck and held on for all I was worth. She smelled wonderful and I knew every second without her would be a hole in my life. When I released her she ran into the sled without looking back. Marantha and Slicker went over to the Left Guard to question Ow Dao. The rest of us loaded up on supplies, aimed our critters east, and made for the point.

## RESPECT, JUSTICE, AND SUCH

After the first dark shape on the sand, we knew that the night of the thirteenth was going to be one of the worst. Frozen stripped bodies were laid out next to the trail, sometimes alone, sometimes in little groups of three or four. Instead of just leaving them like they fell, the bodies had been arranged flat on their backs, hands crossed over their breasts, faces covered with a piece of desert sheet. I remember thinking that the Razai was becoming civilized.

By the time we reached the point I had counted over three hundred men, women, and children who'd fallen from the cold and the march. Of course that was only one end of one column. If the rest of the groups were doing as well, that would mean maybe another seven hundred or so dead from exposure or exhaustion. An even thousand for the night's work so far.

The corpse of a little girl of eleven or twelve stuck in my head as a permanent resident, one of the first ghosts to move in my head that I hadn't killed myself. She'd been stripped like the others, but in her left hand was a dirty faded rag doll. For some reason no one'd been able to bring themselves to take it from her. As we left her behind I filled myself with hate and toasted on it until we reached Nazzar's troops.

The unarmed and walking members of the point gave Stays directions to where the actual point guard was playing host to a special unit that'd been put together by Bloody Sarah. Once we were there, however, there was no one there. Between Rheme Nazzar's armed point and the remaining point troops from Mihviht, there had to have been close to fifteen hundred sharks, but we couldn't see any of them.

I pulled up my critter, looked at the dunes, studied the shadows, and strained my ears. Leaning over, I poked Stays in his shoulder. "Are you sure this is the way?"

"I'm sure, I think."

"What the hell do you mean, you're sure you think?"

I heard the movement of cloth behind me and I turned to see a red light staring at me out of the darkness. In an instant I grabbed for a rifle that was no longer on my shoulder, and reached for an ice pick that was miles south with the Bordentown Ghoul.

"Hold it, Chief," said Stays. "It's Show Biz."

I took a deep breath, vowed to get myself another rifle, and let out my air. "Flash, if you ever want to see another sunrise, you better not turn that camera on again until you get rid of that red light! You understand me?"

I looked around and searched the shadows. Careful or paranoid? The question of the moment. Bad vibrations were crawling all over me. "Anybody got a fire cube?"

Stays struck one and tossed it as far forward as he could. The grit lit and there weren't even any tracks. Stays turned his critter around

and pulled it up next to me. "I don't get it. Where are they? Where are their tracks?"

"What about it, Watson? Is this the way or not?"

"Maybe I heard the directions wrong."

"Maybe, my ained ass."

There was a slight buzzing sound and I turned to see Jontine looking through her little camera at the pitch black beyond the edges of the light. "Knock off the noise, too," I hissed. "Besides, you can't see anything out there anyway."

Jontine did not bring down her camera but continued sighting through it. "It has an light amplification lens in it. I can see like it's purple daylight."

"Keep looking."

We all looked for a long time, finding nothing until on the dark air came the soft "call-all-all-all" of a Suryian night dove. My fears eased and I smiled for two reasons. First, there are no Suryian night doves on Tartaros. Second, I had heard Bloody Sarah give the call before.

Too quickly for Jontine's special viewer, the dunes surrounding us erupted with motion and light. A hundred fire cubes were struck and flung toward us. In seconds we were surrounded by ignited fire cubes and were staring down the barrels of six hundred rifles. I nodded and thought to myself that Sarah and the Colonel must have hit it off pretty good. I smiled as I realized that there was just a little bit more to the exercise than what I saw. I couldn't help but believe that it had been staged, at least a little bit, to stiffen the spine of Bando Nicos.

A bit later, my bunch was together with Rheme Nazzar, Colonel Indimi, Bloody Sarah, and Ondo Suth. After a quick pan with her vidcam, Jontine sat back and listened as we were brought up to date. Kegel's column was only days away. By the light of the fire cubes that burned in the center of our tiny circle, Ondo used his fine black sand to sketch out a diagram.

"Right now the Razai be set up usual way, walkers guarded left, right, point 'n rear. From what Bando says, the protos comin' in from Earth, Kvasir, 'n Cumaris'll be organized same way, though I don't know where they exactly be. More protos'll be followin' them, too, I expect."

He reached down and drew a long line. Next to it he drew another. "Kegel's got maybe thirty thousand mounted rifles. He runs 'em in a double column like this. Each column'll be about eight riders across, and the columns'll be separated by no more'n a good shout."

"Ondo," said Bloody Sarah, "Do the columns ever lose sight of each other?"

"Sure. Once you're far enough into the dunes, each column has to weave its own way around 'em, and the dunes get pretty big. So the columns don't stray too far from each other, they send out runners every now 'n then."

I pointed at the diagram. "What about guards? Do they run anything on the flanks, point, and rear?"

He put in a tiny mark far ahead of the double column. "Up here they'll have a small mounted scout group at point. It's not big like ours. It's not supposed to do anything' but hustle back and warn the columns in the event of trouble." He added two more dots, one on either side of the double column. "Same thing here and here."

"No rear guard?" asked Sarah.

Ondo shook his head. "They figure the supply train makes enough of a rear guard. They'll have a couple hundred rifles riding around

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the baggage sleds and maybe another couple hundred in the sleds." He thrust his lower lip out as he looked at the diagram. "Of course, Kegel thinks his ass weighs a ton. He can't believe anyone in his right mind would attack him. When he got the news about you chups thinnin' his whole patrol, he must've eaten his beard."

He drew a third long line centered on the previous two, but far behind them. "This is his supply train. Back here on sleds 'n pack critters he'll have food, water, ammo, spare weapons, tools, and shelters."

"Ondo Suth," said Lomon Paxati, "how do you know these things?"

Ondo looked up from his diagram at the President. "I used to be in Kegel's gang. I was part of the scavenger patrol the Razai thinned." "I see." The President turned his head until he was looking at me. "How many more members of Kegel's gang are in the Razai?"

I shrugged. "Maybe two hundred. We don't exactly call roll every morning."

"I see." The President tugged at his lower lip for a moment. When he released it, he looked at the fire cube but addressed me. "Bando Nicos, what is to keep this fellow telling the truth? And if he is telling the truth, what is to keep other members of this Kegel's gang from informing on the Razai as to our size, composition, arms, disposition, and so on?"

"Maybe I can answer that," said Stays as he reached beneath his sheet and pulled out his copy of the *Law*. "Our third law is the law of silence. If you break the law of silence, it draws the max."

"The max?"

"Death," I answered. "Anyone who joins the Razai from another gang, like Ondo or the sharks from the Hand, are free to come and go as they wish, but if they break the silence, or are captured at some time in the future fighting against the Razai, it's the max."

The President slowly shook his head as the corners of his mouth went down. "Every nation has similar laws, and every nation has its traitors. The reason I mention it is, from what I understand, we can't afford the luxury of a traitor."

"We can't hold prisoners," I said. "So what can you do?"

Ondo pushed himself to his feet and stretched his legs. "Only speakin' for myself, chup," he began, "the Razai is the only gang on the planet I know where the people are in charge." He looked at Paxati. "We vote in the Razai. We vote on our laws, we vote on who bosses us. And we got the *Law*. If somebody thins me or tries to thin me, I know he's going to get his. In the Razai I got the right to life. I don't have that nowhere else on Tartaros. I'm not about to throw it away."

"How do the others feel?" asked the President.

"I can't speak for them," he answered as he shrugged. "There're a few who'd sell us fast enough if they thought Kegel had a chance of takin' them prisoner."

I held up my hands. "We'll have to bite that bastard when it jumps us." I looked at Sarah. "What's your plan right now?"

"I'm going to resign."

"Like hell."

A little mischief crept into her eyes. "It's true."

"I'll tell you when you can resign."

She laughed out loud, and so did Colonel Indimi. "Bando," she said, "I can't fight and train troops too. I know all about Habran Indimi. He's an excellent officer, and he should be in command of the army. Once you okay him, he'll organize and continue to train the protos and protect the column while I run a raider force that'll

attempt to stall Kegel and whittle him down. Later, when the new troops are trained, we'll all get together and do Kegel."

I listened to them talk, and there were countless details to work out, not the least of which was would the original four generals be willing to serve under the Colonel, or were we about to have a revolution? Nazzar seemed to admire Indimi, and Sarah'd sent out messengers to Rojas, Dao, and Vekk.

From Lomon Paxati we learned that the ship full of maus from Kvasir had the beginnings of a protest group forming. They held that, since all of them were innocent, they didn't want to be ruled by a bunch of convicts who deserved Tartaros.

"Rule two," I answered. "Each person is free to follow whatever leader he or she wants."

"That could cost a lot of lives," said Colonel Indimi.

"It's already cost a lot of lives," I answered. "We formed that rule on our third day on the sand to allow Nkuma and his followers to strike out for the Green Mountain Mirage. We're not in the Razai by force. We're here by choice." I looked at the President. "There's nothing to protest in the Razai. Either you vote to change what you don't like, or you get the hell out."

A frown crossed Paxati's face. "Get out?"

"Yeah. They stroll, take a walk, *vaya con nada*, they do the Forever Sand their own way."

The frown on the President's face deepened. "Isn't that rather extreme?"

I nodded at Ondo. "He tells 'em how to survive in the sand, if they're willing to listen."

"Still, isn't this exile in the midst of exile rather severe?"

I looked at Stays, and Stays smiled and looked at the President. "You haven't put in much time behind the crowbars, have you?" Stays asked.

"In prison, do you mean?"

"That's what I mean."

"Except for the ship that brought us here, I have never been in a prison."

Stays crossed his legs and leaned forward, his elbows upon his knees. "The stains on Kvasir just swept you people up and dumped you in a ship bound for here?"

"In essence. There was a brief confinement by myself in my home for a period during my farce of a trial, but I don't suppose that counts."

Rhorne Nazzar climbed to his feet and flexed his array of muscles as he stretched. "Man, what dimension did you warp in from?" He chuckled and pointed at the President as he squatted down. "Every pit—every prison—has its own way of doing things. They got the rules and the stains, but the sharks got their own rules, too. It's us against the stains, us against time, us against the other yard gangs, us against the system, us against everybody else in the universe." Rhorne folded his arms across his chest. "And either you're on the team, or you're out."

"Even if being out means death?"

"If you're out," I answered, "your death isn't my problem." It sounded meaner than was necessary, and I tacked on a little bit in the way of easing the chills. "Paxati, between the desert, the Hand, Kegel's gang, and the other gangs out here, the Razai is already facing more enemies than it can handle. We can't afford the time and effort to be looking over our shoulders, too."

I got to my feet and nodded at Indimi. "Okay, Colonel, you are now in command of the army. I'll lay it on you the way Nance did

## Absolute Magnitude

when she appointed Sarah. You're in charge of the army, so you are in charge of the sharks. The sharks elected Nance Damas boss, so they're in charge of her. She's in charge of you, which means until she gets better I'm in charge of you. You got any problem with that?"

"If I ever do, I'll let you know."

When I heard his answer I thought, now there is a carefully chosen bunch of words. I looked from him to Sarah and around the circle. "I think I already know the answer, but the question needs to be asked: Is there any way we can avoid Kegel?"

Sarah shook her head. "He's looking for us, and he's totally mounted, so he's moving a lot faster. Right now we're too big and clumsy to hide from Kegel, too slow and short on rations to outrun him, and not well enough armed or trained to outfight him."

"What about running east?"

"We're not ready to take on the Hand. If we did try to streak east, we'd get caught between both Kegel and the Hand, and that would be the end of Rico."

"Rico?" asked the President.

"Just a phrase," I answered. Turning toward Indimi I asked, "So what's the plan?"

"As the major said, she'll try and stall Kegel and wear him down while we organize and train. Because of the signal flares that have been going up every hour each night, Kegel must have a fair fix on where we're headed. I suggest that we keep a small party headed east to put up the flares and take our main body and head north for right now. It might draw them off and give us an extra two or three days."

I frowned and rubbed my chin as I thought. If we kept heading east, our collective best guess was that we would make it to the Big Grass and water in six days, with maybe two days of slack, provided no one was there to give us a hard time about using the water. Every hour we spent going north would be shaved off our slim margin.

Then I shrugged. If Kegel mauled us, we wouldn't need the reserve, and if we did Kegel we'd have his supplies and still wouldn't need the reserve. "Okay, Colonel, you got yourself a deal. Keep me in on what your up to?" I looked at Sarah. "How're you going to keep in touch?"

"Mounted couriers. I'll send at least one each night, more often when there's a need. You can communicate with me by return mail. During the daylight hours, if concealment isn't a priority, we can use the helicopters."

"Helicopters?"

She pulled a gleaming piece of metal from beneath her sheet and caught the light from the fire cube with it and flashed it into my eyes. "Helicopters. We made them from the box lids."

I stood over her and offered her my hand. She took it and I pulled her to her feet. She studied my face. "What is it, Bando?"

I scratched the back of my neck as I felt very uncomfortable. "I was the one who picked you out of the column to organize us an army."

"Yes?"

"Well," I moistened my lips and looked down at my feet. "Be careful out there. We're asking an awful lot of you, and if you got thinned out there, I'd feel—"

She burst out laughing and put her arms around my neck and gave me a big hug. When she was finished, she held me out at arm's length. "There's something you don't understand Bando."

"What's that?"

She reached beneath her sheet and pulled out her personal cutter. As she passed the pad of her thumb across the edge of the blade she

said, "This is what I do. This is why the gods inverted steel and gave me hands. This is what I live for: I'm a warrior in Valhalla, my friend. A pig in slop heaven."

She kissed my cheek, motioned to a few shalows, and left the circle. I could tell that the Colonel was mighty cranked about something. It might have been concern for Sarah. Then again it might have been plain envy because she and not he was riding off to fight a thirty thousand man mounted army with only a few hundred Razai. I wondered if I'd ever understand a mind like that, the kind that likes the fight, maybe even needs it. But then I didn't have to understand them. All I had to do was aim them.

I looked at Stays, Paxati, Deadeye, and Jontine Ru. "I'll be moving back up the trail to meet the new sharks and welcome them to the Razai." I glanced at Stays. "I'm a little nervous about the pistachios Nkuma might be picking out for RCs. I want you to stick with the home column and run the cops."

He nodded. "What about new rules?"

"What new rules?"

His shoulders gave a tiny heave. "I figure with all of the new sharks coming in and with you back in town, there's going to be lots of trials and plenty of new rules."

"How's that thing worked out where all the RCs get together in a huddle to decide on new rules?"

"We haven't had to use it yet. I don't think we can now with all the new sharks and the RCs spread out over such long distances. If all the investigators have to huddle over each new rule, our trials'll look less like justice and more like the juicer back on Earth."

I nodded my agreement. "For right now, if a new rule comes up, I'll act as a clearing house." I thought real hard about what Nance had said. "On second thought, you be the clearing house."

"Me?"

"You. Also, have the RCs keep you posted about their trials. If you can't be there in person, have a runner there who can get you to the justice in a hurry."

"Justice?" interrupted Jontine Ru. She was grinning and holding out her hands. "I apologize, but this seems to be a strange place for such a word."

"And," Paxati joined in, "you seem like strange people to be using it."

"Straightmeats," I heard Nazzar mutter.

I looked at Lomon Paxati and half made up my mind about my choice for gang boss trainee and the reporter both. My first thought was, you judgemental assholes. My second thought was that it took a judgemental asshole to judge someone a judgemental asshole. Again that brought me back to who in the hell was Bando Nicos to be judging anyone about anything. I shook my head and looked at Show Biz.

"So what do you call justice?"

She glanced at the President and returned her gaze to me. "I'm not certain, exactly. What's right, what's fair and moral."

"Justice," said Lomon Paxati, "is upholding what is just. In other words, in accordance with fair treatment and the law."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "We word it different. In the Razai, justice is everybody getting exactly what they deserve as fast as possible."

"How do you know what someone deserves?" Paxati looked at Stays. "I mean, how do you decide your laws?"

"The laws are voted on," answered Stays. "We make up the rules as we go along."

## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

Show Biz shock her head. "By what standard? How can you know what someone deserves?"

I felt cornered. I was Stays who answered. "I never thought about it before, but it's not really a conscious thing with cons. On the sand and back in the crowbars, every shark has burned into him a particular sense of right and wrong. In any given situation it's as obvious as hell to any brother or sister crowbar who should get what. I'm not talking about court games back in the system. There the sharks use the rules to escape payback. But inside the crowbars there is no escape. If you snitch, or if you steal from or kill a stand up shark, you get your payback."

"And the payback in the crowbars," I continued, "usually fits the crime a lot better than the juicer does it. In the crowbars we don't get tangled up with cockroaches, black rags, and technicalities."

"Cockroaches?" asked Jontine Ru, looking at Stays.

"Lawyers."

She looked at me. "All of those technicalities are designed to protect the rights of the guilty and the innocent alike, aren't they?"

Stays and I both laughed, and we could hear the laughter from the shadows beyond the light of the fire cube. Like they say in CSA, there comes a time when you simply have to accept you can't turn the light bulb on in someone else's head. Everybody's switch is on the inside. I pushed myself to my feet and began walking toward my critter.

"If you're coming along with me, mount up." As the three of them got to their critters, I turned and looked at Stays, "Be seeing you, Watson."

"Take care, Sherick ck."

I looked at my companions. "You keep listening and watching. It's the only way you're going to learn anything. And you have a lot to learn."

I mounted up, headed west, and wondered if this lonely feeling was a permanent thing for those in charge.

### THE NICOS RABBINATE

On the way through the walking column that night, I had Paxati, Deadeye, and Show Biz hit the supply sleds for water and what rations they could scrounge, while I hit the ordinance sled for a repaired rifle and a belt of ammo. Emmet and Gordo had already begun the conversion, so they were already collecting ragbox shots for the ballistic check. They still didn't like it, which was no new thorns in my crown. I had problems of my own.

Hours later, the color of blood filled the sky as we left the protection of the rear guard behind. The morning light made it easier to follow the trail back to the column from Kvasir and it melted the frost on our bones. Then it began melting our bones. I shucked my shirt and parka, and as I was bundling them up to sling on my back, Deadeye rode up beside me.

"Back there. We're being followed."

I pulled up, turned on the back of my critter, and squinted against the glare. Lots of dust. Riders. From the amount of dust it looked like a column of a few hundred sharks traveling at a trot. If it was Kegel, that would be the end of Rico.

"What do they want? Who are they?" the President demanded.

Show Biz had her v-dcam on them. "Hey, Flash," I said. "You got a zoom on that thing?"

She nodded and showed me the little orange button to push on the side of the tiny box. I looked, fiddled with the button, and brought in

the image of the riders. There were a couple hundred of them, all mounted and all armed. I could see they wore a mix of desert sheets. Some wore Kegel white, a few wore the color-marked sheets of the Hand, there were a bunch of the new sand-colored camouflage sheets as well as a half dozen of the Mihvhiitan copper-colored rags. I handed the v-dcam back to the reporter.

"It's okay. With that mix they have to be Razai. Let's climb down and spell the animals."

I dismounted and leaned on the back of my critter. Between my stench and the aroma of the lughox, it was whiff. I looked over and Deadeye was leaning on his own mount. "So you were a hitter, right?"

He faced me, stared for a second, blinked, and nodded. "That's right."

"How did it make you feel?"

"How did it make me feel?"

"All those people you killed. Did it bother you, killing them? Did you feel guilty after?"

His eyebrows went up in surprise. "It was business. I wasn't emotionally involved." He cocked his head toward me. "What about you?"

I looked back at the riders, but I wasn't seeing them. Instead I was seeing my ghost parade from Dick Irish to Deadeye's brother, David. "It bothers me. Killing bothers me."

"You feel guilty about splashing my brother's brains?"

Hoorah, hoorah. Finally we were going to talk about the white elephant that had been sitting on top of us. "Yeah. I feel guilty about it. There wasn't anything else I could do, but I feel bad."

Deadeye shook his head. "Get yourself another line of work. You don't get any points for feeling guilty. All you get is an ulcer."

"So how do you feel about me dropping your brother in the grit?"

Deadeye stared off in the distance, and twice his mouth started up with some smart crack, and twice he killed it. Finally he said, "Twenty years ago he was my brother. The pistachio you drilled was different. Talking to the shadows. He was more salted than Manson, he was a bundle of bent struts, and I didn't know him." He glanced at me. "You want me out of the RCs?"

I shook my head and looked at the approaching riders. Why was it so hard for me to distinguish between having a good attitude and being a sociopath?

When I could make out their faces, the column of riders began slowing down. In the lead was one of Bloody Sarah's grunt thumps, Zarika Yute. Another one of her officers was Bongo Lee, and next to them was Jak Edge. When the leaders reached us Zarika held up her right hand, halted the column, and gave the order to dismount. I almost held my breath waiting for the bad news, whatever it might be.

"Hi, Bando," Zarika greeted with a big grin. She was pretty chunky, hauling maybe three hundred pounds on a five-ten frame. Like the other women in the column her dark hair was cut short.

"Hi, yourself." I nodded at Jak, Bongo, and the others, then looked back at Zarika. "Let's have the bad news. What's happening?"

Her thick eyebrows went up. "No bad news, Chief. Colonel Indimi sent my gang back to make like guards on the new loads of sharks." She nodded toward Bongo Lee. "He's running a training unit Indimi put together. We're all yours."

Bongo grinned causing the ends of his Fu Manchu moustache to point outward just a bit. He hailed from the Crotch and both he and Zarika were military rabbits left over from the Syrian Revolt, like

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Bloody Sarah. He was probably the most evil looking chop I'd ever met in my whole life. "I'll be dividing up my training people among the newcomers and setting up programs. That way, by the time they have to tangle with Kegel or the Hand, they won't be absolute frog green."

I felt like a jerk for not having thought of it myself. Of course, I reminded myself, my job isn't to think of it myself, my job was to appoint good people and get rid of the idiots. The flaw in the job description as I saw it was, what if I was one of the idiots I should be trying to dump? I gave her the nod and pushed my critter toward the west.

The small column rode until the sky was white and the heat reflected from the sand torched the insides of our nostrils. I had my hood closed over my face with only a slit open for my eyes. Although I did my best to examine the surrounding dunes, the glare was much too bright to see anything. After awhile I remembered what Nance had said about trust. I had a guide, two hundred guards, thirty combat experts, and Deadeye for a bodyguard. I closed my eyes and made for the zeds. After a few minutes of fitful sleep, there was a voice. "Bando Nicos?"

I uncovered my face and looked. Jak was up ahead and Paxati was riding beside me. The President hadn't said anything since we had left the main column. I had been too preoccupied with my own concerns to notice, so when he finally did speak, it startled me.

"What?"

"With all of the good that I am doing, I might as well have stayed with Nkuma. Why do you keep me with you? I have a right to know."

Why did I keep him with me? A real good question. "I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time."

I glanced at the President, and he was glaring at me. I shrugged. "It's the truth. Look, you must have some idea by now what we're facing here on the big beach. There hasn't been a waking minute during the past two weeks that I haven't been in it over my head."

"What has that to do with me?"

I looked at him and held out my hands. "You were elected the president of an entire planet, many millions of men and women. You must've thought you could handle it. All of those people who voted for you must've thought you could handle it. That's why I stole you from the welcome wagon. Nance Damas is hurt, and we need someone in charge who knows what he's doing. That was why."

I was afraid he was going to ask that particular question, and he asked it. "If that is indeed the case, why have you had me just tagging along as though I were some sort of sidekick? Why don't you give me something to do?"

I checked, and although she was listening, the reporter was not taping. Again I looked at Paxati while the truth, that in a society of sharks he didn't appear competent to make shit stink, scrolled behind my eyes. "On the job training," I finally answered. "You have a lot to learn about Tartaros, about sharks, and about the Razai."

"I'll have you know, sir, that I hold doctorates both in political science and law, and have done extensive graduate work in criminology."

"In that case, you just might be beyond hope," Deadeye muttered. The sharks around me laughed at the remark, and I headed for the night horse, leaving Paxati to play with his own problems.

I covered my face and wished for a piece of sleep featuring no ghosts. The sleep eventually came, but Tani Adulo's bare little ass was there along with the rest of the spirit herd. Even David Ostrow

was there and saying that sooner or later his brother Jay would burger Bando Nicos. All of them were still asking the same questions.

Why am I dead?

Who in the Hell was Bando Nicos to kill me?

In my dream I yawned, said good night to the ghosts, turned over, and went to sleep. That's how I knew I was really tired.

### NHANDI V. NHANDI

"There they are," called Jak Edge from the front of the column. I uncovered my face and jabbed my critter forward. As we approached the limits of the point guard, the Kvasiri were in camp, beneath their sun shields, resting for the night's march. I turned on the back of my critter and motioned to Bongo Lee. He dug his heels into his critter's sides and was soon riding on my right, his Fu Manchu dancing in the breeze.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Bongo, get your gang busy. We're only going to be here for a few hours, then we're going on to meet the nuts from Cumaris."

The chop pointed with his thumb back toward his team. "How many should I leave behind? I'm asking because I don't know how many more groups Nkuma's wagon is going to bring in before I get a refill of training officers."

"How few can get the job done?"

"For sixteen thousand sharks?" He frowned as he looked at the President. "And they really aren't sharks, are they?"

"If you mean convicts," said the President, "you are quite correct. They have been convicted of nothing."

Bongo looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "If all of them think the same as this asshole, I don't think any number would be enough."

"Why?" I asked. "You'd think a bunch of straights'd be smarter, easier to teach."

Bongo shook his head and pointed his thumb at the President. "They don't speak Crowbar."

The chop had put his finger on it sure enough. It wasn't that they couldn't understand the words. They didn't have the experience behind the walls that cuts through the fog. Their definitions came out of a dictionary. Ours came off the cell block wall. I couldn't even imagine what it would be like with the ship load of crazies from Cumaris.

I faced Bongo. "We'll see how it goes. If more trainers're needed, we'll send for more." I gestured with my head for him to rejoin his troops.

Jak Edge waited for us, and when me, Show Biz, the President, and Deadeye reached him he heared up his critter. "The group from Cumaris should be due west, maybe two hours past this bunch."

I nodded in acknowledgment. "Let's get moving."

The column moved forward and I stared in wonder at the acres and acres of maus from Kvasir. Under normal circumstances my skin is dark enough to keep me from getting hired first or from getting a good table at the local bistro. Right in the middle of all that melanin, however, I felt pale. The news of our arrival spread and we were soon met by an even paler face: the ex-priest, Fcdder.

The man's eyes were still haunted, and the two-week old beard of white made him look like a derelict. Back on Earth, back when he was still a priest, he had killed a man and a woman in an alcoholic rage and had raped a young girl. Ever since I knew him back in the Crotch he had been eating himself alive over his crimes.

## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

"What're you doing here, Fodder? I thought you were with Nkuma and the welcome wagon."

He moistened his lips and looked away as he answered. "When we passed through here last night there was a problem. Nkuma left me to straighten it out." His voice was weary. He looked up and stared me in the eyes. "I'm an RC."

There was a round of chuckles from the sharks who'd done time in the Crotch. I tried to ignore it, but Show Biz turned on her vidcam. I faced the ex-priest. "Is the problem straightened out?" I asked.

His shoulders gave a tiny shrug as he looked down at the sand. "I guess I'm no better at being an RC than I was—" He cut himself off and looked up at me. "There's a family named Nhandi."

"I know them," said the President. "Bhadri Nhandi and his wife Pura. They have a young daughter named Lauris. On Kvasir Bhadri was one of our most important political leaders. What was the problem? Are they all right?"

Fodder responded to none of Paxati's questions. Instead he kept looking at me. "There's a Kvasiri RC that Nkuma appointed soon after he found them. Her name is Fanta Cerita. The Nhandi girl, Lauris, came to her to get out of her family. The way she put it was that she wanted to divorce her parents."

"Impossible," declared the President. "The child must be overwrought." He looked at me and held out his hands. "Bhadri and Pura Nhandi are two of my oldest and closest friends."

"Shut up. Okay, Pres?" I nodded at Fodder. "Go on."

"The child asked to get out from under her parents' control and have the same rights as anyone else in the Razai."

"How old's the girl?"

"Eleven." Fodder was silent for a long time.

"And?" I prompted.

The ex-priest held out his hands. "Fanta Cerita took a bribe to decide in favor of the father." He shook his head and stared at the sand. "All that we've fought and died for. And to get a pack of tobacco cigarettes." He looked up at me and said, "I don't know what to do." He pulled some papers from beneath his sheet. Shaking them in the air he cried, "The Law doesn't cover it!"

His hand came down slowly. I studied him and I was sure that he had only told me the easy part. There was always a complication and Fodder didn't want to talk about it.

"What you've told me so far, Fodder, the Law covers." I dismounted and slogged through the sand until I was standing in front of him. "Spill it, you old fart. What's the rest?"

Fodder looked at me and his washed out blue eyes seemed to haze over as he barely whispered, "Nicest! Nhandi has been raping his daughter!"

I looked at him. In his heart he was a criminal, not an instrument of Razai justice. Who was he to point the finger at a child rapist, even one who raped his own daughter? For hadn't Fodder been the father to all the young boys and girls, and hadn't he taken one of them and raped her? Who was he to point a finger? Still, with the self-imposed whippings Fodder had been giving himself for years, how could he stand by and do nothing while Bhadri Nhandi abused his daughter?

He could hardly draw an even breath. I placed my hand on his shoulder and said in a low voice, "What went before the landing is done past, Fodder. It can't be changed any more than I can change the murder I did back on Earth. And you know I've given the max for murder."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Feel about it? How do you think I feel about it? I have a herd of ghosts riding my back every minute. But I can't waste time listening to them. We have too much work to do now to spend all of our time in the past."

"What I did, in God's eyes—"

"Pack it, Fodder." I removed my hand from his shoulder as I remembered something Najina had said at the CSA meeting. "Fodder, if that god of yours can't come up with some forgiveness for you, fire the judgemental son of a bitch and get yourself one who can!"

I turned my back and rubbed my eyes. It seemed like ten times a day I was faced with things I couldn't even imagine taking on before the landing. Just for openers there was Bando Nicos handing out spiritual advice to an ex-priest. But there were more serious problems than that.

A crooked cop. An RC with dirty fingers. It took everything I had ever heard at the CSA meetings to keep from losing my reason in the flames of my rage. There was a piece of me, an incredibly gullible, incredibly naive piece of me, that believed we would never have a dirty cop. Because of who we were, what we were, and where we were, such a thing could never happen. You can't ever imagine having a thousand snakes dropped in your lap, and then it happens. Wasting time saying, Hey, this can't be happening, makes no sense. The snakes are there. The only question left is, what do you do with them?

"Fodder—Man, what in the hell is your real name?"

Fodder had to pause and think for a moment. "Amos," he answered. "Amos George."

I looked back at him. "Amos, do you know about Compulsive Self-destructives Anonymous?"

"Yes. I've seen you at a couple of meetings. Don't you remember?"

There was a hazy memory or two from the meetings I had attended. He probably had been there but I had been too wrapped up in myself and in my own pain to notice.

I reached out and put my hand back on his shoulder. "I want you to stay close to me for the next couple of hours. There are some things that need to be done, and it would be real easy to do them from the center of a rage. If I pick that route, I'm afraid I'll never come back. You understand?"

He nodded. Still holding onto his shoulder, I gave orders to Bongo to begin the training and more orders to Zarika Yuta to take her two hundred rifles and post guard on the camp. When they had gone, only Jak, the President, and Deadeye remained. I motioned with my head for them all to follow Fodder and me. "Let's go. We have some garbage to clean up."

I looked at Fodder. "Show me Fanta Cerita."

### LESSONS AT THE RABBI'S KNEECAP

Again I looked upon a familiar scene. There was Bando Nicos beneath the scorching rays of Alsvind, standing between a couple of dunes crowded with maybe two thousand angry faces, preparing to do something very unpopular. Before me stood a tall woman with purple-black skin and such a regal bearing that you just knew she came from a long line of queens. She was smoking a nail and her name was Fanta Cerita. Seated at the base of the dune to my right were Bhadri Nhandi and his wife, Pura. Bhadri was a handsome man in his late thirties. His wife's face reminded me of my mother. They

## Absolute Magnitude

were both looking at the other dune where Lauris Nhandi sat stonefaced staring at me with unblinking black eyes. The girl's parents appeared very hurt and very concerned for their daughter.

I had Fodder, the President, and Deadeye with me while Jak Edge and a few of Zarika's rifles wandered around in back of the crowd just in case somebody might want to start rocking. Only we were armed, so there was no need to go through the rifle stacking ritual and we could get right to the action. I nodded at Lauris Nhandi.

The girl stood and walked until she was between the two dunes. She moved as though she was an old lady. Her face showed no emotion at all. I recognized that face. It was the face put on by every child who lives in Hell and has absolutely no control over the monotony of horrors that are constantly inflicted upon her. Her face said, this I can control. I can't stop you, but I'd rather die than let you see my tears.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," she said. Her voice sounded very small, very strained.

"You have a problem you want to bring to the RC?"

She nodded.

"Tell me what it is."

She glanced nervously at Fanta Cerita and back at me. "I was already told I had to stay with my parents."

"There are a couple of problems with what happened before. We're going to iron them out right now. Tell me what your problem is like no one was ever told before."

She took a deep breath and balled her hands into two tiny fists. The kid had lots of guts. She had no reason at all to trust the RCs or the Law, and there she was about to drop another tarantula into her old man's drawers. "I want to divorce my parents. I don't want them to control me or to tell me what to do anymore. Just like it says in the Law. Rule Two." She turned her head slowly until she was looking square at her father. "I want to be free of them."

"Is that all of it?"

"That's all of it," she answered as she turned her face toward me. "I want to be free of them."

"You got it," I said.

The dunes erupted with mumbblings, and the child's father jumped to his feet and shouted, "You can't do this! What kind of a hearing is this? She's my daughter! This has all been settled! You can't take her away from me!"

I fired my rifle in the air and the crowd hushed. After a moment of silence, I resumed. "As I told Lauris," I began, "there are a couple of problems with what happened before. If she leaves her parents, we won't be taking her away. She'll be walking under her own power and she'll choose her own direction." When I was certain the crowd had termed its hosties a shade, I slung my rifle. I felt a hand on my arm and I looked and saw the President standing there.

"What?"

"Bando Nicos," he pleaded, "is there not something you can do to stop this humiliation? Lauris Nhandi is a very difficult child, and she—"

I grabbed Lomon Paxati by the front of his desert sheet and hissed in his face, "Little children who're being fucked by their fathers tend to get a little difficult!"

His mouth fell open with utter shock. He pulled himself free of my grasp. "I don't believe it!"

"You don't have to. Neither does anyone else, because that isn't the issue. The issue is that she wants to be free of her parents. That's all she asked for."

I pulled out my copy of the Law and talked to the protos. "The first law the Razai ever voted on was the no prisoners law. We don't take prisoners," I said to the Kvasiri, "we don't hold prisoners, and we don't allow others to take and hold prisoners."

"She isn't a prisoner," interrupted Bhadri Nhandi. "She's my daughter. She belongs to me."

I shook my head. "She don't belong to you, man. In the Razai nobody belongs to nobody. Nobody in the Razai is property." I held up my copy of the Law. "Wasn't this read to you people when you joined the Razai?" I turned and shouted at the other dune full of faces. "Didn't somebody read this to you?"

There were some muttered assents followed by a shout from the left that was crammed with just about all of the prime Jesus-what-an-asshole-you-are sarcasm in the galaxy. "There is a difference between forced incarceration and being part of a family."

I looked and the mau was short, stocky, and had his big fat nose up in the air. Instinctively I wanted to stick my rifle in his mouth and blow his think goo all over the sand. He had to be a cockroach. It wasn't a debate, but the guy's expression teased me into a little of it. I jabbed the President with my elbow. "Who's that?"

"His name is Colis Vizelandi. He is a very distinguished attorney."

Maybe I was born with a special cockroach detecting antenna in my nose. I faced the money threads. "Aside from biology, man, what's the difference?"

"Purpose, for one. The purpose of keeping a prisoner is punishment, rehabilitation, or control. In a family the nature of the control over a child is benevolent."

From behind my left shoulder erupted an almost maniacal laugh. I turned and it was Fodder. He was holding his rifle across his chest and on his face was the look of someone who was about to empty a machine gun into a crowd just for the sake of letting off a few decades of steam.

"Amos," I said quietly. "Amos?"

Fodder looked at me. The fingers wrapped around the handgrip of his weapon were dead white. In slow stages his mouth closed, his eyes seemed to focus, and his trembling eased. "According to the Law," he said, "friends of the court may give testimony. I want to say something."

"It's already over, Fodder. She's free. It's the Law. All we're doing now is farting through our hairpieces."

"I've got something to say." It took me a bit to decide, but in the end I figured it would be better to have him say it than shoot it. "Go ahead," I pointed at his weapon. "Sling your piece."

Fodder slung his rifle and walked until he was standing next to Lauris Nhandi. He reached out a hand to place it on her shoulder, but before he touched her his hand became a fist and he withdrew it. He turned to his right and faced the cockroach. "Compared to some families, prison is a treat. Next to some parents, torturers and slavemasters are kind and gentle mentors." Fodder turned and looked around at the dunes. His voice became very strong. "A lot of you think you're better than us—better than the convict-exiles—because you've never been in the crowbars. When Nkama picked you out of the sand, however, you didn't look any different than us, and you certainly didn't bleed any different. He met you maybe ten hours after you were dumped, and already you were divided up into gangs and were killing each other over food, water, and old scores. For the rest of you, I think the only difference between you and us is chance. We got caught; you didn't."

## Kill all the Lawyers — Part II

There was a rumble from the dunes, and before it became audible, I cautioned them about Rule 13. "Remember: a threat is a crime, and the thing you threaten to do is the punishment."

When it was again quiet, Fodder continued. "In the serenity of hearth and home," he began, "how many of you beat your wives, your husbands, your children? That's assault." He faced Bhadri Nhandi. "Under the cover of darkness, how many of you force your daughters and your sons—"

He closed his eyes and folded his arms across his chest. When he again opened his eyes, his head was back and he was looking up at the white hot sky. "Once upon a time there was a little boy whose mother was a judge. She was a black rag judge in a divorce court. Every day she would preside over hoards of parents and cockroaches as they tortured little children. She would end her day by sentencing poor little bastards to one parent or another. When her day was finished she would come home and make her little boy take off his clothes and climb into the bathtub. The boy was terribly shy and felt so embarrassed he thought he would die.

"His mother would remove all of her clothing, and then she would climb into the tub and wash him, concentrating on his genitals until his penis grew hard. Then she would slap it and accuse him of being a filthy little pervert. When the bath was finished, she would stand in the middle of the floor with her legs apart and make the little boy get down on his knees while she—"

For a moment I thought Fodder was either going to faint or kill somebody. When he calmed down, however, he continued with a trembling voice. "The little boy's father was a doctor. One time when the little boy didn't think he could stand anymore, he told his father what had been happening. The boy's father beat him. He beat him and accused him of being a dirty little pervert."

As Fodder talked I watched Lauris as she listened to him. Although she hadn't said a thing, by her reaction to Fodder's story, she had me convinced that at her father had been on the bung with her.

She reached out and held Fodder's hand. He looked down into her eyes and continued in a quieter voice. "A year later, the boy was eleven, the father happened to walk in on one of these bathtub events. The mother was caught, and the little boy's heart soared with hope."

I saw the tears glistening in Fodder's eyes. When the words came out, they were choked and rough. "It turned him on! That's right! Seeing his eleven year old son eating out his wife turned him on. The three of us—the three of them slept together after that. After his mother would finish with him, his father would use him. They even called it love." He turned and faced the cockroach. "That was a family; that was a prison."

Bhadri Nhandi stood and walked until he was standing over his daughter, intimidating her with his height. To Fodder he demanded, "Tell me if you are accusing me of something. If you are, I want to see your proof. Are you accusing me?"

"Right now," I interrupted, "there is no trial and no one has been accused of anything. The girl is free to go where she wants."

The cockroach came down from his dune. "Certainly there are families where there is abuse, but not all families are like the one described by our friend here."

Fodder nodded. "Not all families are like that. But freedom is never like that. In the Razai, wherever we are, whoever we are with, it is by choice." He held out his free hand and looked around at the crowd. "Every son and every daughter here will remain with their parents until they choose otherwise. That's the Law."

Bhadri looked at me and held out his hands. "Can't we be reasonable about this?"

"Sure," I said. "Just as long as Lauris winds up where she wants to be. That's what we call reasonable in the Razai."

"This is absurd. She's too young to even know what she's doing. How is she going to eat? How is she going to survive?"

"Those're good questions for any one of us right now. How are you going to eat? How are you going to survive? Nobody knows that right now."

"Are you saying that a four or five year old child who throws a tantrum and gets angry with its parents can end the relationship?"

"That's what I'm saying." The ghost of Tani Achelo, slender and naked, danced before my eyes. "Bhadri Nhandi, we are the Razai. We—each of us individually—are responsible for our choices." I looked around at the dunes, picking out the youngest faces. "Each one of us is responsible for his or her own choices. If you eat up all of your rations at once, it's your choice, and it's no one's responsibility to feed you."

I looked down at Lauris. "If you bail out on your family, you're on your own. It's your choice, and your responsibility to take care of yourself." I looked at one of the punk faces in the crowd. "If you are only a child and you play a trick on someone who ends up dead because of it, you end up dead too. That you didn't really mean it doesn't count. The only thing that counts is that you took a life. It was your choice, and it is the Law."

I turned back and looked at Bhadri Nhandi. "And in the Razai if you force someone to have sex, no matter who it is, you get the max."

I looked down at Lauris. "What about it, kid? No one can fix it until you say it's broke."

Still holding Fodder's hand, she slowly shook her head. "I listened when the Law was read," she whispered. "What happened before the landing is done past, like it never happened." Her head stopped shaking. "He hasn't done anything since we landed. I think he wants to start, but he hasn't done anything since the landing."

It was frustrating. I wanted to smoke Bhadri Nhandi out of his sox so bad I could taste it. Another piece of me knew that he was sick. The kiddie bangers at the CSA meetings had taught me that much. Still, I wanted to show Lauris that, despite Fanta Cerita's paid for decision, the law of the Razai could hear her tiny voice. But what happened before the landing was done past, and Bhadri Nhandi was in the clear.

I shrugged and said to the little girl, "That's it, Lauris. You're free. All of the kids are free. Everyone in the Razai has the same rights." I looked at Fanta Cerita. "Now we take care of you."

Fodder whispered in the little girl's ear and let go of her hand. As he stood up he turned toward me and said, "I'm the RC here, Bando. It's my case. I'll handle it."

I studied him. There was something different about his face, his voice, his bearing. He was light years away from the whining chup who met me on the trail with "I don't know what to do." Maybe he had figured out what to do. I sure as hell didn't know. Nance said I have to trust my people. Fodder was one of my people. I shrugged and got out of his way.

"So handle it."



# Letters Page

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Dear Mr. Lapine:

I just picked up my first issue of your magazine at Barnes & Noble. I read your story, [AM#3] "Siblings." Wow! I haven't read any science fiction or fantasy short story in any publication for a long time to equal this one, and I've read most pubs in the field. The way you elucidate the problems that arise when two different life forms fail to understand each other was both provocative and profound. I read so much science fiction and fantasy that makes me ask, "Why was this story written?" and along comes yours and I don't need to ask.

On top of this dilemma, you handled the problem of a woman's molestation well. I loved the way you tied it in with the rest of the story, especially how you pointed out how most cannot deal with the harsh experiences in their lives, but they should. It was truly an inspiring story.

Sincerely,  
Chad Murray  
New Haven CT

Dear Mr. Lapine,

Thank you again for your positive response to my work. However, seeing as how I've battled 0 for 2, I think it might be wise to pick up a copy of Absolute Magnitude's latest issue so that I can get a better handle on just what it is you're looking for.

I appreciate your efforts!

Brad Torgersen  
Mount Vernon WA

*—Reading the magazine is the best way to figure out what I'm looking for. Sadly most new writers never bother doing this and therefore don't really understand why they aren't selling to a particular market.*

Dear Mr. Lapine:

I just picked up a copy of your magazine (issue #3, Summer 1999) at a "Bookstop"—chain book store here in San Antonio. I was not previously aware of your magazine and am glad to see another outlet for good science fiction. As a matter of fact I particularly liked your comments in your

"Editorial Notes." I have never thought that there is anything but serious science fiction and to reduce it to a crutch for a particular writer's dubious humor seems irrelevant.

Sincerely yours,  
Manuel Morales  
San Antonio TX

Dear Mr. Lapine,

I had a lot of fun with Janet Kagan's [AM#3] "Fermat's Best Theorem," despite knowing that most mathematicians are not very much like the ones in her story. The truth is, we're all too obsessed with talking about mathematics (and, alas, with the need to publish our results) for a secret this big to have remained secret for long. Still, there have been well-known "secret clubs" for mathematicians (most notably the Bourbaki group), so the idea is not totally off the wall.

At this point, Andrew Wiles' proof looks quite correct. It's a wonderful accomplishment. The idea that his proof is horrendously complicated is not quite true. To be sure, it uses quite a few modern results in mathematics, building on the work of others, but that's exactly what mathematics is always like. The basic idea is sound. Wiles' proofs are, in the end, quite clear and beautiful, so that his proof, while probably not what Fermat had in mind, is certainly "marvelous." I'm not sure where Ms. Kagan got the idea that a proof that's "easy enough to recall" would have to be short. Wiles' basic strategy is (for someone in the know) quite straightforward to explain and recall. Of course, the real meat (and the real difficulty) is in the details.

Best,  
Fernando Q. Gouvea  
Waterville ME

Dear Mr. Lapine,

Although Abilene Texas is as far away from civilization as it can possible be, our media "Superstore" is at least good enough to carry your magazine. I picked up the Summer 1995 issue about a month ago and read every page. I especially enjoyed the story by Linda Tiernan Kepner, "Planting Walnuts." I hope

to see more of her in the future!

Sincerely,  
Kirk Brown  
Abilene TX

Dear Mr. Lapine,

Your magazine is impressive and of high quality. I wish all sci-fi magazines were of the same quality, if anyone deserves to succeed you certainly do. Your blitz replies are also remarkable, you are probably the fastest editor in the genre. I am sure most authors greatly appreciate this since that way one does not have one's manuscript callously held off market and then returned after an inquiry with no show of interest.

Sincerely,  
Larry C. Dossey  
Carlsbad CA

*—I don't really understand why most editors sit on manuscripts for a long time. You can't buy a story if you don't read it.*

We want your letters! Let us know how we're doing. If we print your letter, you'll receive a copy of the issue in which it appears.

Let your voice be heard by voting for your favorite stories in this issue. Just fill out the ballot at the bottom of this page and return it to us. One entry will be chosen at random to receive a free one-year subscription.

The results of our first reader's vote are in, and they were very close. Five stories came within four votes of one another. "Mice" by Shariann Lewitt came in first, one vote behind her was "Amp" by Chris Bunch, and one vote behind Chris was Allen Steele's "Working for Mr. Chicago." Honorable mention goes to both Brooks Peck and Jamie Wild, whose stories tied for fourth place, one vote behind Allen Steele. Esther Simone-Jones was the lucky reader who won a free subscription.



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